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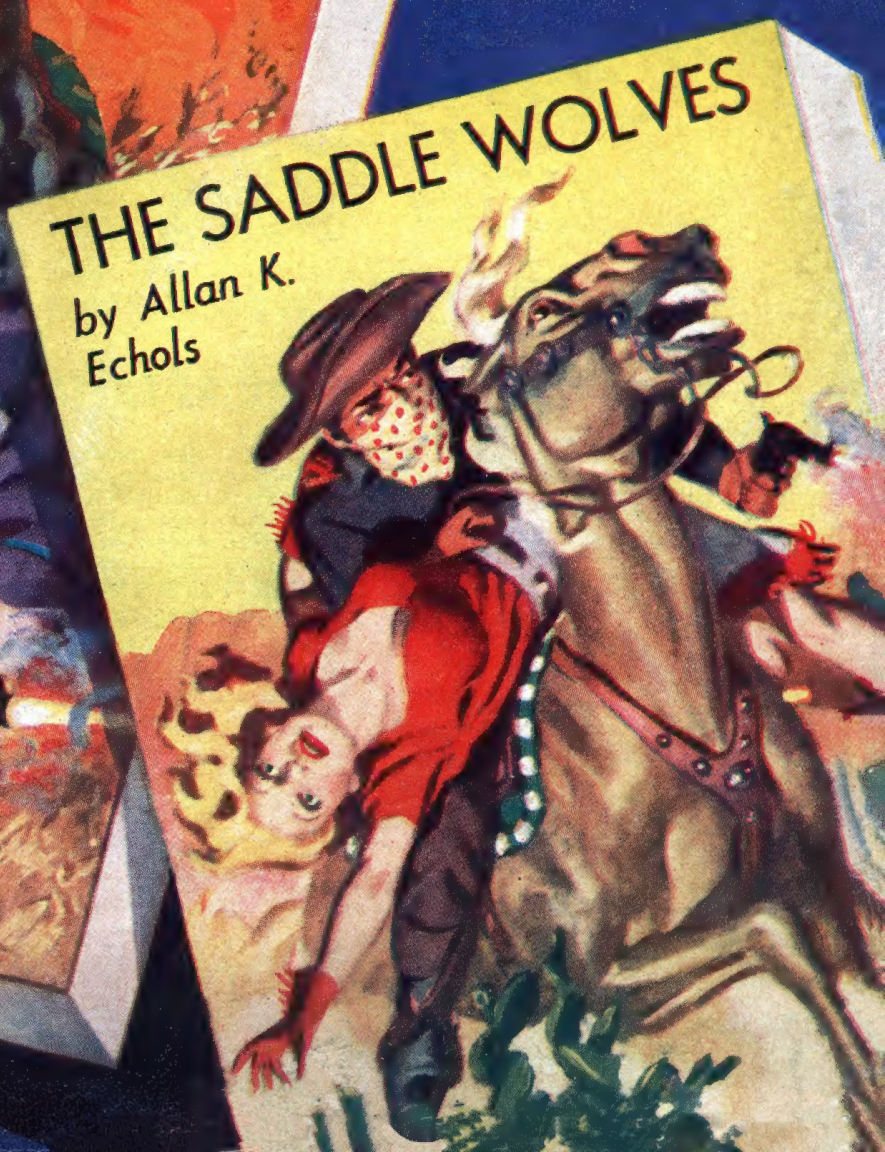

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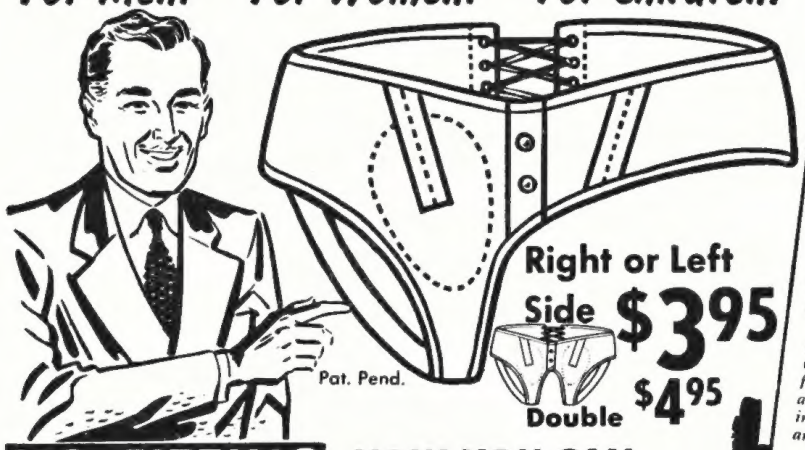

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RECKONING GUNS

By ROE RICHMOND

RECKONING GUNS

By ROE RICHMOND

The heavy stench of guilt wafted up from the Garriott's Hatchet spread, drifted across the western territories and lighted on Ash Cordell, grim, steel-eyed Colt-hellion from the blood-red valley of Vengeance . . . land of the Reckoning Guns.

CORDELL cut out another calf and drove it into the chute, where the last one scrambled up bawling and bucked away, the smell of scorched hide mingling with the hot dust, heated iron and sweat of men and horses. Cordell's rawhide riata flickered out, caught the calf's forelegs and threw it, as the slate-colored pony skidded to an abrupt stiff-legged stop. Tannehill promptly pinned the frantic wiry little creature in the dirt and laid on the iron with a firm expert hand. The animal snorted and struggled in panic, bellowing with the shock of pain, as Cordell shook his loop free and reeled it in. Tannehill released the calf and watched it go bounding into the corral.

"I hope we aren't gettin' any Hatchet stock," Tannehill said, grinning up at the rider through the sunshot haze of dust.

"That'd be too bad, Tan," agreed Cordell soberly, wheeling hs mount away to repeat the process.

Spring roundup was about finished on the Delsing spread. That was the last bunch of calves out there now. The Delsings—father, son and daughter—were holding the gather, while Cordell did the cutting and roping, and Tannehill attended to the branding. It was one of the small layouts on Wagon Mound, worked mainly by the family. Cordell and Tannehill were the only extra hands at present, and they would be leaving as soon as the roundup was over. Ash Cordell never stayed long in any one place, and Tannehill was content to follow wherever the other went.

It was this thought that troubled Laura Delsing, as she rode back and forth on her bay mare, helping keep the herd intact, and watching the two men at work. They could have qualified as top hands on any of the big ranches, but they preferred to work for the smaller outfits when they worked. Her eyes lingered particularly upon the big rangy man topping the blue roan with the gray mane and tail. It was a pleasure to watch the effortless grace and flawless precision of rider and horse, moving in perfect coordination with never a false or wasted motion, none of the flourishes that showy cowhands indulged in. But Laura Delsing's admiration went deeper than that.

She knew Cordell was going, and nothing she could say or do would hold him. He had stayed on the Double-D longer than he remained at most places, through the beef roundup last fall, the mild Southwest winter, and now the spring roundup of young stock. That, she knew, was because of her,

T. T. SCOTT, *President*
MALCOLM REISS, *General Manager*

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JACK BYRNE, *Managing Editor*

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"Ride or climb for it, men," shouted Rubeling as the herd stampeded into the narrow draw.

and probably it was a tribute, but it was not enough for Laura.

Dan Delsing, her father, was worried too, aware of her feeling for Cordell and knowing that she was going to be hurt, as he had warned her she would be. Slumped in his saddle, wide shoulders and stocky form sagging, Dan watched Cordell with a tired sun-squinted frown. He liked Ash about as well as any man he knew, but that did not alter the fact that Ash Cordell was a fiddle-footed incurable drifter, no man for any girl to fall in love with. *I should have sent him along last fall,* Dan Delsing thought, *I might have known . . . They're the best men I ever had riding for me, but I shouldn't have hired them on at all.*

Young Fritz Delsing, seventeen, with sunny blond hair under his hat, was following the movements of Cordell with absolute hero-worship in his bright blue eyes. If he could grow up to be like Ash Cordell, that was all he asked. And the long, lean, drawling Tannehill was second only to Ash, in the boy's mind. It sure was lucky that those two had come along, he reflected gratefully. And he hated to think of their leaving, as much as Laura did, if for a different reason. Fritz resented his sister sometimes, for hanging around and dragging Ash off with her. He knew Ash would rather be talking man-talk with Tan and him, but of course Ash was too polite to hurt a girl's feelings.

FRITZ was growing impatient now with the tedious business of holding the little herd, and he called out: "Hey, Ash! How about me takin' a few of 'em in?"

"Why sure, Fritz," said Cordell. "I was gettin' tired anyway. Go right ahead, son."

The boy unlimbered his rope and booted his pony in to cut out a heifer, and Cordell started easing out around the bunched stock toward Laura. But Tannehill yelled from the branding pen: "Cord, you wanta spell me for a stretch? I've eaten about all the dust and smoke my delicate stomach can stand."

"Be right in, Tan," said Cordell, turning back and trailing Fritz as the boy hazed his calf into the chute. It was just as well if he kept working and didn't spend too much time with Laura, thought Cordell. It was getting hard to talk to her lately, with both of them thinking about the imminent separation. This was one time that Cordell cursed the eternal fever of restlessness that possessed him and wouldn't let him settle down anywhere. The Double-D had been like home these past months. The Delsings were a fine family, and it had been very comfortable and pleasant there. But the urge to move was on him now, and Cordell knew from experience there was no use in fighting it. Not even for a girl like Laura.

Fritz missed his first cast completely, and caught but one leg on the second try, much to his disgust. Tannehill wrestled the animal down in the weltering dust, planting the iron and loosening the kid's rope. "I'll get the next critter clean, Tan," promised Fritz. "Musta been kinda nervous on that one."

"Sure, Fritz," drawled Tannehill. "You got to get into the swing of it, that's all. Watchin' Cord's no great help to a young hand."

Cordell, about to step down, sank back into the leather and stared off across the sunburnt surface of Wagon Mound into the southeast. Out toward the needle-sharp columns of the Spires, a dustcloud was rising saffron in the sunlight.

"Company comin', Tan," murmured Cordell.

Tannehill walked to the rail where his gun-belt hung, and buckled it about his slender hips, tying down the bottom of the holster. "We got time to finish 'em up, Cord?"

Cordell estimated quickly and smiled. "With a man like me on the irons, I reckon so.You and the kid keep 'em comin', Tan." He swung out of the saddle, and Tannehill stepped into it.

"You sure this crowbait cayuse'll hold up, Cord? If it does, the kid and I'll bury you in young beef."

Cordell rinsed his mouth and drank from the water bucket, looked to the irons in the fire, and waited for the calves. Fritz roped and threw his second one with deft dispatch, and Tannehill choused another in and spilled it at Cordell's feet. They came fast after that, almost too fast at times, and Cordell was soaked with sweat in the swirling heat-laden dust. The bunch outside dwindled rapidly, and Dan Delsing sent Laura in to the ranchhouse. Young Fritz

was whooping it up, having the time of his life, and Tannehill was laughing and shouting with him, heaping jovial abuse upon Cordell's dripping bronze head.

They had completed the job, and were waiting at rest, as the incoming riders approached. There were five of them, and even at a distance there was something that marked them apart from ordinary cowhands or cattlemen. A fighting-cock arrogance in the way they rode, an aggressive warlike aspect about them. Some of the Garriott gunhands from Hatchet, the largest spread in the Carikaree Valley, Ash Cordell recognized at once, and the old hatred for everything pertaining to Hatchet and the Garriotts stirred deep and bitter within him.

"Go in and help your mother and sister, Fritz," ordered Dan Delsing.

The boy shook his tow-head stubbornly, a pleading look on his thin flushed face. "Please, Dad. There's five of *them.*"

"It'll be all right, Dan," said Cordell gently. "There won't be any trouble here."

He could identify the individual riders as they drew closer, and Cordell smiled with grave amusement at the surprise and disappointment they showed on finding Tannehill and himself there with the Delsings. Neither of the Garriott boys, Gene or Kyler, were in the party. Talboom seemed to be the leader, a tall lank man with a knobby beaked face, pitted with pockmarks. Skowron, short and squat, bloated and red of face with piglike eyes, was evidently second in command.

Eakins was a small warped figure with a large chew of tobacco lumping his wizened cheek. Blodwen, a giant gone grossly fat, looked too heavy for any horse to carry, even the huge black he straddled this afternoon. Thorner was young, well-built, darkly and incongruously handsome in that ugly group, cool and debonair despite the blazing heat. They all wore two guns and had carbines in their saddle-boots. Reining up near the corrals, they sat their horses and stared down at the three dismounted men and the boy before them. The silence stretched out thin, and the tension grew intolerable.

"Well, what do you want?" Ash Cordell asked evenly, at last.

"Nothin' from you," Talboom said, studying the newly blanded calves. "Your herd's growin', Delsing. You got a lot of young stuff."

"It's all mine," Dan Delsing said, standing square and solid with thumbs hooked into his gun-belt.

"I wonder some," mused Talboom. "You Wagon Mound nesters always swung a long rope."

"WATCH your talk, mister," warned Dan. "This is no nester outfit, and you damn well know it! I got a legal claim here and my brand's registered."

Talboom smiled, a crooked gash across his bony pocked features. "Time's change, I suppose some of you bobtailed outfits are legitimate nowadays. But to Carikaree cattlemen, Wagon Mound'll always mean honyonkers with long ropes, crooked runrunnin' irons and alterin' markin' knives."

"Did old Gurney send you?" Cordell broke in, anger fretting his impatience. "What the hell do you want here anyway? Sing your piece and drift along, Talboom."

The Hatchet men looked at him, hard and cold but with a certain grudging respect.

They knew Cordell and Tannehill. and they hadn't expected to find them still at the Double-D. The ragged-pants, fly-by-night spreads on Wagon Mound seldom had riders of this caliber. Generally they were dull-eyed, heavy-handed farmers, family men who didn't want to fight and die in front of their womenfolks.

"Gurney Garriott's kept you alive for quite a spell, Cord," said Talboom mildly. "You never did appreciate what old Gurney's done for you, and your brother and sister too. But the boys, Kyler more'n Gene, don't seem to share them sentiments of Gurney's. The Carikaree ain't goin' to be any country for you, Cord, when old Gurney turns Hatchet over to his boys."

"That's my worry, Tal," said Cordell calmly. "You've had your say, now slope along out. This is a workin' ranch here."

"We'll travel, in our own time, Cord," said Talboom.

Eakins spat tobacco juice at horseflies on the corral bar. "We're checkin' Wagon Mound brands, hopin' we don't find any altered Hatchets." He winked slyly at young Fritz, who scowled back at him.

"You won't in my herd," Dan Delsing

told them flatly. "Unless you plant 'em there."

Skowron chuckled and shook his oversized neckless head. "Nesters is all right, till they start growin' big, actin' like real ranchers."

Blodwen moaned and wiped his fat perspiring countenance. "Let's dust along, Tal," he mumbled through the neckerchief.

"I'll maybe see you around sometime, Cord," said Tonk Thorner, a pleasant smile on his good-looking dark face, a reckless hungry light in his intense black eyes.

"Why sure, Tonk," agreed Ash Cordell easily.

Tannehill stood slim and whiplike, contempt plain on his smooth lean face. "Long on talk and short on action," he drawled. "Like most all the two-gun men you see hereabouts."

Thorner switched his dark gaze to Tannehill. "Maybe you and me'll meet up too, Tan."

"It's a small world," conceded Tannehill. "I just hope you're in front of me, Tonk, instead of at my back."

With an effort Thorner curbed his anger. "Don't you worry none about that, brother!"

The Hatchet riders loped away.

"It's a good thing you boys were here," Dan Delsing said.

"Aw, they ain't so much, them five!" said young Fritz scornfully.

"Watch your grammar, son," his father reproved wearily.

Ash Cordell smiled and cuffed the boy's blond head. "You're all right, Fritz. You stood up to them good, boy."

"Bunch of scrubs," Tannehill murmured in his slow soft voice. "If they'd known we was here, Cord, they might've sent some of the good ones. Kyler Garriott himself, Hodkey, Laidlaw, and Hamrick."

"Never seen that Hodkey," mused Cordell.

"He don't hang around the home range much, but they say he's hellfire with a six-gun."

ORPHANED in early childhood, Ash and his brother Clement and his sister Sue Ellen, had been taken in by the Garriotts and brought up on Hatchet. In spite of this, Ash Cordell hated that outfit with a bitter undying hatred, bone-deep and utterly beyond his control.

"Cord, you and Tan go ahead and get cleaned up," Dan offered. "Fritz and I'll take care of the horses."

"You goin' swimmin', boys?" asked Fritz. "I'll be right with you in a jiffy."

The spring rains had increased the water in the irrigation ditch that bordered the ranch site, scarcely enough for much swimming but excellent for bathing. Dan and other homesteaders had dug the ditch from the Bittersweet Creek, which flowed from the Shellerdine Mountains on the north, watering the western margin of Wagon Mound, and winding on southward to its junction with the Carikaree near the town of Cadmus Flats, centrally located in the vast lowland trough. The swim was a daily ritual, when there was adequate water, that Cordell and Tannehill enjoyed almost as much as Fritz did.

Afterward, glowing clean and dressed in fresh clothes, they all sat down to one of Mrs. Delsing's delicious suppers at the large table in the ranch house, fragrant with the aroma of cooking from the immaculate kitchen. Mrs. Delsing, a handsome woman who had grown a bit gray and put on weight in recent years, bustled about trying to wait on everyone, a fond smile on her comely plump face, flushed rosily from the cookstove.

"Well, I suppose you boys are still set on ridin' off," Dan said, broad and stolid at the head of the gingham-covered board. "Reckon there's nothin' we can do to hold you up."

Cordell's smile was somber. "If any place could hold me, it'd be this one, Dan."

"We sure enjoyed winterin' here," Tannehill drawled. "*I* wouldn't mind summerin' here too, but this wild Indian I travel with . . . Come spring, he's got to see what's over the hill, across the plain, on the other side of the mountains."

"It must be Mom's cooking that might hold you, Ash," chided Laura gently.

"Not altogether, but it would help a lot," Cordell admitted. "There are other things, Laura. They all add up to a mighty fine place for a man to make his home."

"I wish I was ridin' with you," Fritz said wistfully.

"A couple more years and you'd do to

take along, Fritz," said Cordell.

"I'm almost eighteen, Ash. You ran away from Hatchet and hit it on your own when you was that age, Ash."

Cordell laughed softly. "I was born wild and tough and ornery, Fritz. Even so, I wouldn't have left a place like this . . ."

"You'd leave any place, Ash, and you know it," Laura said, her voice coming out harsher than she meant it to be.

"You know why I have to go, Laura."

"It doesn't make sense to me though."

"Well, it does to me," Cordell said quietly.

Laura lifted her chestnut head, the red-gold highlights shimmering under the lamps. "You just use that for an excuse, Ash."

"Laura!" Her father spoke sharply. "That's enough."

Mrs. Delsing broke the awkward moment of silence with her well-modulated tones: "We're going to miss you boys, almost as if you were our own."

"We'll probably drift back in the fall," Tannehill drawled. "Time to help round up your beef."

"Where you headin' anyway?" demanded Fritz, disregarding his father's frowning gesture. "You been just about everywhere already."

Ash Cordell smiled. "Not quite, son. We'll maybe hit west into the Madrelinos this trip. First off, anyway."

"If you stop in Trelhaven, you could look for that niece of ours," Mrs. Delsing suggested. "She calls herself Nita Dell, although her name is Delsing, the same as ours."

"It's just as well if Nita doesn't use our name," Laura said coldly. "You'll find her in the lowest honkytonk in town, I imagine."

"Now, Laura," protested her mother. "Nita is a wild one, but the poor girl never had much of a chance to be any different. She's the daughter of Dan's brother, and her folks were killed by Apaches when Nita was just a baby."

Laura winced and half-raised a hand, her blue eyes flitting to Cordell's face, which had gone bleak and old as something carved in dark weathered stone. But her mother didn't know, couldn't be blamed, and Cordell was accustomed to suffering such unintentional thrusts in masked silence.

"They'll do well to stay away from Nita Dell, Mom," said Laura. "That girl means trouble for anybody who goes near her."

Mrs. Delsing shook her graying head. "I thought perhaps they could persuade the poor girl to come back here and live, Laura."

Dan Delsing interrupted his daughter's response with a large lifted hand. "I think maybe Laura is right in this case. Ranch life is too tame for Nita. She has chosen her course, and I'm afraid we'll have to let her go."

"All right, Dan. But I still think it's a shame."

"Who cares about that painted-up Nita?" cried Fritz. "You through, Ash? Come on out and do a little drawin' and shootin' with me and Tan."

"Ash and I are going for a walk, Fritz," said Laura.

"Who wants to go for a walk?" the boy asked in disgust. "Ash promised to tell me about that caper at Fort Washakie on the Wind River, up in northern Wyoming."

Cordell saluted and grinned at the youngster. "I'll tell you later, Fritz, or Tan can give you the story. Tan lies even better than I do, and he was really the big man in that jamboree. Comin' from him, it ought to be real good."

"Girls!" said Fritz, making an epithet of it.

"Have to make allowances for 'em, kid," smiled Cordell.

Fritz nodded his golden head. "Then they wonder why a man wants to get out and hit the open trail!"

Everyone laughed but the boy, and Laura said: "I'll be ready as soon as the dishes are done, Ash."

"You go along now, Laura," said Dan Delsing. "I'll help Mom with the dishes. Be like old times, won't it, Mom?"

"See that you don't break as many as you used to," scolded Mom Delsing, to conceal how pleased she was by her husband's offer.

II

THE brief twilight had deepened into dusk and then darkness, and it was full night as they strolled out along the irrigation ditch toward Bittersweet Creek.

Cordell turned to look behind at the Big Barrancas, far beyond Hatchet in the east, dark, immutable and mysterious, massed high and blending into the star-flecked heavens. The secret to what he had been seeking all his life lay locked in one of those great mountain ranges. Cordell had hunted them all without finding it, but the search would go on as long as he lived. This was what kept him on the move, driving, nagging and tormenting him relentlessly. The memory of a certain valley in the mountains, where he had lived as a child. Cordell could never rest until he found that valley again, for in it he believed was the clue to his identity, the fateful story of his family, the reason why his father and mother had died violently there.

"It won't let you rest, will it, Ash?" the girl asked kindly.

"I reckon not," Cordell said. "It's always with me, Laura, awake or asleep, wherever I go."

"It's strange that nobody knows of such a valley."

"Strange?" He spoke through his teeth like a man in pain. "There are men who know, but they won't tell. I could make them talk, but I don't know who they are or where to find them."

"It's so hopeless, Ash," she murmured. "There's nothing to go on, not a trace or a thread. And it's wrecking your whole life, Ash."

"I can't help it, Laura. You don't understand what it's like, not to know who you are, who your folks were, anythin' about yourself or your people. A man doesn't feel whole, Laura . . ."

"There are lots of orphans in the world."

"Sure!" Cordell said fiercely. "But how many of them hear, and all but see, their parents murdered? How many of them never learn a single thing about their folks? Who they were, what they did, where they came from, what kind of people they were. You don't know, Laura."

"I know, Ash—in part, at least." Her voice was reassuring, soothing, like the friendly pressure of her hand on his long muscular arm. "I feel for you, Ash, and I wish I could help . . . But it seems too bad, to waste your life—and mine."

"We're young, Laura. We've got plenty of time."

"We don't get any younger though. The years go faster all the time, Ash, and you can't bring them back. The clock won't stand still while you hunt for that valley. And when you find it—if you ever do—what's there, Ash?"

"I don't know," Cordell said miserably. "Maybe nothin' . . . But I've got to go on lookin'. I can't stop, Laura, it's stronger than myself, my feelin' for you, and everythin' else. Probably I'm a damn fool, surely I am for not marryin' a girl like you. But I wouldn't be any good to you, Laura, I'd just ruin your life, too."

She smiled up at him. "I'm willing to risk that, Ash."

"No, I can't let you. You'd better cross me off, Laura, forget all about me."

"You're not asking much," Laura said. "Just the impossible . . . I'll never forget you, Ash. But perhaps I'll try to. I can't wait around forever."

Cordell gestured with his free hand clenched into a fist. "I'm not worth waitin' for anyway. I haven't been too good, you know. At times I've done about anythin' I could to get away from *that* . . . Tried to drown it in whiskey, forget it in some woman's arms, lose it in fightin' with my bare hands or a gun. None of it did any good, Laura, but it shows you the kind of man I am."

"I know the kind of man you are," she said simply. "I guess I wouldn't want an angel or a saint, Ash. They'd be kind of out-of-place in a country like this Carikaree."

They walked in silence for an interval, the night more luminous as the moon climbed, paling from gold to silver in the starry sky. The Bittersweet was before them now, rippling with a silken swish among the white-frothed boulders, glinting dappled where the light fell through the frail-leaved branches of cottonwoods and willows. And there was the blackened burned-out ruin of the old Woodlee homestead, on a shelf over the stream. Cordell started to tell her what the Garriotts had done there, and about his good friend Bob Woodlee, but he stopped short, recalling that the Double-D lay in similar peril before the same Hatchet forces.

Those Garriotts sure had a lot to answer for, and Cordell meant to call them to ac-

count before he was finished. Old Gurney, the monarch; big handsome Gene; and the lank coyote-faced Kyler . . . They'd all pay before Cordell got through with them, and with blood.

"I'm worried about Hatchet," said Laura Delsing, as if reading his morbid thoughts, or perhaps it was the charred debris of the Woodlee place that prompted her words.

"Didn't Kyler offer you full protection once?" Cordell inquired, with some sarcasm and malice.

THE girl's smile was wry. "Yes, but only in return for certain favors." It was her turn to be malicious. "Do you recommend that I accept, Ash?"

"Not exactly," he said grimly. "I'm goin' to have to kill that Kyler anyway, sooner or later. I've known it since we were kids. There's some decency in Gene, but none at all in Kyler . . . If he ever bothers you, Laura, that'll be all I need."

"He used to ride around quite often. Then you and Tan came, and Kyler stayed away." Laura sighed. "I suppose he'll start coming again, when he hears that you've gone."

"Tell him to keep clear or I'll kill him," Cordell said with soft intensity. "If I have to shoot my way through every gunhand the Garriotts have got!"

"That won't be enough to scare Kyler off, Ash."

"Shoot him yourself, then."

"You want me to hang?" Laura asked, laughing hollowly. "You forget that Garriotts are not to be shot in this country, Ash."

"Their time'll come," Cordell said. "I'll see that it does."

They ceased walking and sat on the moonlit riverbank.

The thin shrill clamor of frogs rose from a swampy section upstream, and fireflies traced erratic patterns in greenish-white streaks of light under the trees. The feeling of spring was everywhere about them, sap flowing beneath the bark, new life stirring in the earth, the air soft and mellow, moistly caressing their heads and faces.

ASH CORDELL was back in that lost mountain valley of his childhood. He must have been about ten at the time, which would have made Clem around eight, and Sue Ellen six years old or so. The other two remembered little or nothing of those early days, and Ash's memories were mostly blurred. But he recalled sharply certain physical features of the landscape, and a few small details about his father and mother.

It was high in the mountains, because the air was thin and keen, and some of the slopes rising around it were above the timberline, naked and barren in their steep thrust above the last stunted gnarled pines and twisted silvery aspens. A crescent-shaped valley, walled-in by sharp talus slopes and sheer cliffs, watered by a sparkling cold stream that flowed roughly from south to north, the curved length of the depression. Willows and cottonwoods were scattered along the low shelving banks, and grass grew thick and tall on the valley floor, remarkable graze for such an elevation, his father told him.

At the north end of the crescent, the river spilled thunderously over the rimrock in a two-hundred foot waterfall, a roaring white-spumed cataract. In the constant dense clouds of mist that rose from the falls, rainbows might be seen whenever the sun struck right. Guarding this northern end of the valley, rearing in stark monstrous majesty over the waterfall, was the landmark that Cordell knew he would recognize instantly. A vast towering butte, which his mother called the Cathedral, spired and steepled, arched and buttressed, in angular soaring Gothic architecture. . . Yes, he remembered the strange words his mother had used in describing it, and how she had said: "God is the greatest of all architects, Ashburn . . ." Cordell didn't know how or why he should recall those things, but they had always been with him. Perhaps because he had so few memories of his parents, he had striven to retain those.

The Cathedral caught the first long level rays of the rising sun each morning, and was fired first in crimson, then in gold. And every evening the sunset painted its myriad pinnacles, towers and arches in lavish and fantastic shades of every hue, transforming the great shattered mass of rock into a gorgeous magic castle, complete with turrets and bastions, ramps and parapets . . . "A palace of splendor," his mother

said. "Straight from fairyland." It was in connection with the butte, that he remembered most about his mother. That and the clean lavender smell of her.

His father didn't pay too much attention to the Cathedral, beyond giving it a casual tribute now and then, which was probably more to please Mother than anything else. His father smoked pipes and was a hunter, smelling of tobacco, sunburnt sweated leather, and oiled steel, masculine and not unpleasant. A big man with a deep grave voice, silent much of the time and rather forbidding, but jolly and friendly when he joked and laughed. He hunted and shot mountain goats, elk and deer and bear, sometimes a lynx or bobcat. He trapped beaver, marten and mink along the streams lower down the mountainsides. Sometimes he took Ash hunting with him and showed him how to handle a gun.

"We aren't always going to live this way, Ash," his father told him once. "It's only for a little while, son. We've got a place in the world, and we're going back to it before long . . . I won't have my children grow up like wild animals in this wilderness, and your mother wasn't meant for this kind of life either. But we've got to hang on here for a time, Ash boy."

Then one day his father said they were going to move back into civilization, such as it was out in this god-forsaken country. . . But They came, before the Cordell family could move. Ash always thought of them simply as They, but someday he would learn who and where They were, and They would go down under his blasting guns.

Now Ash Cordell shuddered as the memory of that horror came screaming back in his mind, and Laura Delsing knew and understood his agony, pressing his tense hand in both of hers.

The Cordells lived in a log house near the center of the valley, and this day Mother suddenly hustled the three children through the hidden trapdoor into the cellar that Dad had dug for a storeroom. At the foot of the ladder she clasped and kissed them each in turn, warning them to stay quietly down there until they were called up, and Ash noticed that she was frightened and fighting to keep back the tears.

"What is it, Indians?" he asked. "If it is, let me come up, I can use a gun."

His mother laughed a trifle hysterically. "No, it's not Indians. It may not be anything. You stay here, Ashburn, and take care of Clement and Sue Ellen. It won't be long . . ." She kissed him again, harder than ever before, different somehow, and this time her cheeks were streaming wet. Then she hurried up the ladder, dropped the trapdoor in place, and covered it with the bearskin rug.

It came to him that his father and mother had been afraid ever since he could remember, afraid of somebody's coming, and now They were here. He knew then he would never see Mother and Dad alive again, and he climbed the ladder with a terrible shrieking inside him, tearing and rending him apart.

Below Ash the other children commenced to sob again, but he was listening through the plank floor to the oncoming beat of hoofs, the creak of leather and jingle of bridles outside, and then the hoarse harsh voices and stomping boots overhead. He could sense the unleashed anger and hatred, the threat of violence and death in the trampled room above him, and once he heard his mother's voice go up in shrill protest, and break off with the sound of a vicious meaty impact, the sound of a hard open hand against a soft cheek. Ash writhed on the ladder, and his father's voice flared out raging, but there was a quick rush of feet and the sound of another blow, this one more savage and solid.

"WE SENT them away," his mother screamed defiantly. "You'll never find them, you murderous beasts!"

"They'll never know what happened," rumbled a strange voice. "They're too young to know anythin' anyhow." And there was laughter, jarring, mocking, the most hateful sound the boy had ever heard. "Let's get it done with," that same rough voice burred on, and gunshots blasted out roaring and reverberating in the cabin, coming in swift succession.

Ash Cordell almost fell off the ladder then, retching with a horrible sickness, but he clung to the gritty rungs, set his teeth, and butted his young head up gently against the trapdoor. Carefully he inched it upward, nausea sweeping his ten-year old body in waves, until he could peer through a slit

under the shaggy edge of the bearskin and see a narrow portion of the floor. Just the floor and the dusty boots pacing to and fro, riders' boots with cruel-looking spurs clinking as they dragged.

The reek of gunpowder struck his nostrils and clogged his throat, and hot tears scalded his eyes dazzlingly as he choked back the vomit and kept his aching head steady under the heavy pressure of the wooden trap. He wanted to bust up there and fight them all, a kid of ten and barehanded against their guns, and he might have done it if it hadn't been for his little brother and sister wailing pitifully in the nether gloom. Silently, the words flaming over and over in his brain, he was cursing the killers, cursing them and swearing to get them when he grew up. And straining to see some identifying sign or mark on them. . . Nothing but boots, swinging swaggering boots with long-shanked large-roweled spurs tinkling softly on the planks.

Then there was one boot in particular, heavy, misshapen and dragging grotesquely, with a thick built-up sole and heel, the monstrous boot of a cripple. That was something to look for, something to search the world over for, if he had to. Ash let the sight of that deformed boot sear itself into his mind.

The men were getting ready to leave now, and the smell of coal oil came strongly to the boy, followed by the crackle of fire and the odor of burning wood. Ash wanted to get a glimpse of the murderers, but he had to think about getting Sue Ellen and Clem out of there, and soaked in kerosene the house would blaze up like a torch.

Flinging the trapdoor open, bearskin and all, Ash saw the lifeless riddled bodies in a far corner, his mother and father lying dead. He looked out a window and saw the riders, far down the valley toward the southern pass, turn in their saddles to glance back at the burning cabin. Too far away to recognize or shoot at, but he knew one of them was a cripple, and sometime he would see that evil-looking boot again.

The flames roaring hungrily about the walls, Ash ducked back into the tomblike blackness of the cellar, to haul Sue Ellen and Clement up the ladder and out the back door of the blazing structure. There was nothing he could do for his father and mother, the fire was already leaping high about them, and they were beyond further hurt.

Sprawled a safe distance away from the heat and acrid smoke of the conflagration, the three children rested on the earth and watched the only home they knew burn down into a charred black framework of desolate ruin, a funeral pyre for their parents.

The next day an old prospector found them on a down-mountain trail, and took them into the nearest homestead in the Carikaree Valley. From there they were transported by various conveyances to the town of Cadmus, and shortly thereafter Gurney Garriott took them home with him to Hatchet. . .

Laura Delsing's voice startled him back to present reality: "Don't torture yourself so, Ash, please don't. It's time to walk back anyway. I'll get you a big drink of Dad's whiskey."

Cordell smiled somberly at her. "Not much company for a girl, am I? Sorry, Laura."

"It's all right, Ash. Being with you is enough for me."

Cordell leaned over and pressed his mouth against the sweet lush fullness of hers, finding as much peace and pleasure there as he would ever know—until he found Cathedral Valley and the truth about his family and himself, and the men who had murdered his mother and father some seventeen years ago.

III

TWO mornings later they rode out of Delsing's Double-D, Cordell on his raw-boned slate-colored roan, Tannehill on his big gray-mottled buckskin, both men tall and easy in the saddle, not looking back once their farewells were made.

They traveled without talking much, no need of words between them after all they had shared and experienced in farflung frontier places. They had been riding together for seven years now, through all the Western Territories from Texas to the Dakotas, trail-driving cattle, working ranches, freighting and mining, gambling, drinking and fighting. And always hunting for that lost valley, or someone who knew

of it and the Cordell family.

Seven years back Ash Cordell had been twenty, two years away from Hatchet and cutting it on his own, wild, tough and reckless as they come, even in a country that breeds so many with those qualities. In a Dodge City saloon, Cordell had called a house man for dealing off the bottom, gun-whipping the gambler down when he tried to draw. The owner and his strong-arm boys were about to gang up on Cordell, when Tannehill threw into the game on Cord's side. The fighting became general and chaotically confused, riders and townsmen against the saloon employees. It ended with the place a shambles, unconscious and dead bodies strewn amidst the wreckage, and Cordell and Tannehill had stumbled out of it together, tattered and bleeding, carrying bottles salvaged from the ruined bar. . They had been together ever since.

Tannehill was about the same age as Cordell, twenty-seven now, as tall as Cord's six-foot height but built sparer and slighter, slender and sinewy. Tannehill was rawhide-tough and whip-limber, with an amazing amount of explosive power packed into his lean long-limbed frame. His voice and actions were lazy, indolent, but he could move like lightning when he had to. Tannehill's brown hair had a rust-red tinge, and his mild brown eyes held a yellowish flare when he was aroused.

They splashed across the shallows of Bittersweet Creek, speaking of Bob Woodlee as they viewed the rubbled remnants of the Woodlee ranch, and went on to drop from the western rim of Wagon Mound. On their right towered the Shellerdines, tier on serrated tier of stark grandeur, and on their left the Bittersweet curled across the greening bronze lowlands toward the Carikaree and Cadmus Flats. Ahead was the gray bulk of Confederate Ridge, and they pointed for that.

Cordell was thinking that he should have swung southward and followed the Bittersweet down to Cadmus, where Sue Ellen and Clement were living with Ma Muller in her Hillhouse Hotel, since Ash had removed them from Hatchet and arranged for their new home. Sue Ellen waited on tables, and Clem worked as desk clerk and handy-man. It was an ideal setup, because Ma Muller couldn't have been any fonder of her own flesh-and-blood than she was of the Cordells. Yes, he ought to go in and see how the kids were getting along. They were pretty well grown up now, and Ma Muller couldn't always handle them like she used to.

There were times when Clem fretted irritably against his routine tasks and humdrum existence in the hotel, envying Ash the unrestricted freedom and excitement of his roving life. Ash would have taken him out on the trail occasionally, but for the fact that Clem lacked the necessary toughness, sharpness and self-assurance. At least, it seemed to Ash that he did. . . Clem had never taken to horses, guns and fighting, the way Ash did. Clem was quieter, gentler, kinder—and softer. A well-bred carriage horse, while Ash was a wild stallion. Clem was twenty-five now, but to Ash he was still a small kid brother to be protected and sheltered.

And Sue Ellen was a young lady of twenty-three, a very pretty young lady, blonde and gray-eyed, her hair much lighter than Ash's, golden where his was a dusky bronze, her features delicate and refined, yet stamped with character and a proud wilful strength. It was difficult to realize that his little sister had become a woman, fully matured in mind and body, and it struck Ash with a cold shock that she would be getting married one of these days. The idea was unpleasant, almost revolting to him. There weren't any men good enough for Sue Ellen . . . Tannehill was, of course, but Sue Ellen regarded him as another older brother in the family.

She'd probably fall for some no-good stuffed-shirt in town, with long pomaded hair and a store suit, whose very presence would set Ash's teeth on edge and make his knuckles itch yearningly. Big Gene Garriott, the good-looking Garriott boy, had tried to court Sue Ellen, when they were all kids together on Hatchet, and even after the Cordells moved into the hotel in Cadmus Flats, but repeated beatings and threats of death from Ashburn had finally discouraged Gene. It was funny, mused Ash, in early boyhood at the ranch Gene had always licked Ash, but in later years it was Ash who administered the thrashings. It had never been easy either way, however, for they were evenly matched, Ash's superior

speed compensating for his lack in bulk. Gene was a strapping giant, like old Gurney, his father.

Well, if Sue Ellen's choice of a husband was too bad, Ash would just naturally break up the wedding, that was all. . . He shook his head, swearing softly and spitting aside. Tannehill edged his buckskin over and held out a plug of tobacco. "You're spittin' kinda dry, Cord." Grinning and accepting the plug, Cordell bit off a generous jawful. Chewing was a comfort on the gusty open trail, where the rolling and lighting of cigarettes was impractical.

That afternoon they skirted the southern flank of Confederate Ridge, lining on toward Sulphur Springs where they planned to camp the first night, the sun in their faces as it slid slowly down the molten blue sky toward the high-ranked Madrelino crests.

"Tomorrow night we'll make Trelhaven," drawled Tannehill. "It'll seem kind of nice to hit a real town again."

"We'll load up with supplies there," Cordell said, "and head for the highlands."

"We better load up with liquor too. It's been a long time since I drank my fill, Cord. Let's lay over an extra day or so, to get drunk and taper it off."

"Sure, Tan, it might do us good to howl a little. Reckon you'll be lookin' up that Nita Dell girl too, won't you?"

"I might, at that," grinned Tannehill.

"Sulphur Springs ahead," said Ash.

Tannehill sighed and stretched in the leather. "I wish it was Trelhaven. After workin' eight months without hardly a break, I feel like a big bad curly wolf from the high timber. I got to howl before long, Cord, else I'll bust wide open!"

"We'll do some howlin' tomorrow night, son," Cordell said with a bleak smile. "There's a little pressure built up in me likewise."

ASH CORDELL woke up groaning. He was lying fully dressed on a bed in a room in the Elkhorn Hotel in Trelhaven. They had checked in last evening, or was it two nights ago? He wondered what had become of Tannehill.

Pain rocketed through his skull, as Cordell pushed himself into a sitting position and dropped his numb legs heavily over the edge of the bed. There were bottles all over the place, and he stared blankly at them.

The hectic blur of the past twenty-odd hours came into focus as he smoked. They had arrived about sundown, stabled the horses, had a few drinks, enjoyed the luxury of barbershop baths and shaves and haircuts. Then supper, a little polite drinking in saloons, and a lot of plain and fancy drinking in this hotel room. Bob Woodlee was out of town, so they hadn't seen him, but they met a lot of people in the gambling houses, barrooms and dance halls of Trelhaven. Yes, they even met Nita Dell, the runaway cousin of Laura and Fritz Delsing. Someone had warned them that she was Kyler Garriott's girl, and somebody else inferred that Bob Woodlee was sweet on her. Nita was quite a number, and she'd never belong to any one man, Cordell was certain of that.

Putting on his hat and strapping on his gun-belt, Cordell was about to go in search of Tannehill when he heard him coming along the corridor, his voice raised in rollicking song. The door opened and Nita Dell was with him, dark and vivid with impish black eyes, pouting provocative scarlet lips, and a fullblown voluptuous body. She wore a gown of red satin, shining tight at bosom and hips, and flaring widely toward the floor.

"See what I found, Cord," said Tannehill. "Ain't she pretty? "Ain't she cuter'n a speckled hound pup, though?"

Nita swayed close to Cordell, her sensuous face lifted, dark eyes flirting up at him. "I like you," she said childishly, and he saw that she was drunk. "You're big and strong, ugly and beautiful."

"Hey, what's the matter with me, Nita?" demanded Tannehill. "You think I ain't big and strong and beautiful? Listen, where I come from the women just claw each other's eyes out over me, gal."

Nita laughed. "Go back where you come from, Tanny boy." She moved closer to Cordell, so that her perfume filled his head and he could feel the vital warmth of her body. Her firm shoulders and round arms were naked, and suddenly her arms snaked about him with surprising strength and she stood fully against him, pressing and swaying as if to slow music. It was because he

had refused to dance with her last night, Cordell knew. Smiling faintly he disengaged her arms and thrust her gently away.

"Better get her out of here, Tan."

"But why? Hellfire, we just got here, Cord."

"She's drunk for one thing."

Tannehill laughed hilariously. "So am I, and so was you."

"She's Kyler Garriott's girl, for another."

"Kyler's not here, Kyler's in Cadmus," Nita chanted. "Don't be afraid of Kyler."

"What about Bob Woodlee?" asked Cordell.

Nita laughed with contempt. "Him? Why, he just loves me to death. He wants to marry me!" She laughed as if at some huge ludicrous joke.

Cordell's broad mouth straightened thinly, and his angular face froze hard. "I'm goin' for a walk, Tan."

"Have a drink here with us, Cord. We're just stayin' for one drink."

"See you downstairs," Cordell said, and heard the girl spitting foul curses after him as he shut the door. Some wildcat, this relative of the Delsings. If what she said was true, he felt very sorry for Bob Woodlee.

At the head of the stairway leading down into the lobby, something compelled Cordell to halt and turn back, some primitive sense of lurking danger behind him. The corridor was vacant when he peered around the corner, but even as he watched a door opened across the hall from their room. Two men appeared, vaguely familiar in the shadowy dimness of the hallway and paused before the room which Cordell had just left. Loosening his gun in its holster, Cordell paced back down the long gloomy corridor toward them, treading lightly, eyes alert and right hand spread-fingered for the draw.

They were Hatchet men, as Cordell had suspected, the squat blocky Skowron and the lithe handsome Thorner.

"Lookin' for somebody, boys?" inquired Cordell.

Tonk Thorner, the nearest, whirled to face Cordell, motioning Skowron back. "A pleasure, Cord, and sooner than I expected," Thorner said, debonair as ever and play-acting a bit. "You boys ought to know better than play around Hatchet property."

"I didn't read any brand on it," Cordell said.

"It's there, Cord. And you was warned last night."

"So what'll it be, Tonk?"

SKOWRON'S bloated face scowled under the stress of the moment, his small eyes blinking furiously. "One woman ain't enough for you, mister? The Delsing girl ain't enough, you got to go after Kyler's woman? That Delsing girl was Kyler's too, till you hit Wagon Mound."

"Shut up, Skow," said Thorner, "This one is mine. You can have the drunk in there."

"So you want war?" Cordell said easily. "Too bad to start shootin' over a dance hall chippie, Tonk."

"Whatever she is, she's Kyler Garriott's. Some people figure you been livin' a lot too long, Cordell, and I'm one of 'em. I been wantin' to get you in front of me for quite some spell." Tonk Thorner stood smiling, his elbows out wide, a poised and somewhat theatrical figure in the drab murky corridor.

"Well, you've got me," murmured Cordell. "Make your play."

Tonk Thorner swept into a two-handed draw, for which he was justly famous. Cordell's big right hand dipped and came up with fluid speed, thumbing off a shot as Thorner's guns cleared the leather. The blast of Cordell's .44 lighted the hallway, the Colt kicking up hard in his hand, the report deafening between the walls. Thorner swiveled halfway around and bent in the middle, gutshot, his guns exploding into the floor with a thunderous sound. Pitching forward on his face, Tonk Thorner squirmed briefly, went rigid, then slumped back and motionless.

Skowron exhaled raspingly and reached for his holster, half-hidden behind Thorner until Tonk went down, and Cordell was switching his gun onto the second Hatchet man when the door slammed open and Tannehill came out behind a flaming gun barrell that bucked up, leveled, and lashed out with another bright roar. The short bulky Skowron jerked back under the walloping .44 slugs, fired ceiling-ward as he bounced brokenly off the wall, turned in a sagging lumbering circle, and landed flat on his back, crosswise of the corridor be-

hind Thorner's silver-inlaid boots.

"That damn girl—tried to wrassle me down," panted Tannehill, as they crouched over the two fallen forms.

Nita Dell emerged wild-eyed from the room, and fled sobbing along the smoky hall, leaving a trail of perfume through the gunpowder.

"Looks like they planted her," Cordell said. "Had us all framed up, only it backfired on 'em." He completed his hasty examination. "Both still alive but not much chance for Thorner here. Skowron maybe'll pull through."

"Hell to pay, huh?" muttered Tannehill. "Wisht I'd sobered up more. Reckon they'll hold us, Cord?"

"Not for long, Tan. They know us, they know Hatchet, and they know Nita. The Garriotts aren't so popular in this west end of the Carikaree. It was self defense, their guns were fired, and the law here's got no use for Hatchet gunhands."

"But it'll be war with Hatchet from here on. We'll have all the Garriotts on our necks."

"Yes, we'll have that all right," agreed Ash Cordell.

IV

THREE mornings later, they were cleared, free, and getting ready for their trek into the Madrelino Mountains.

Tonk Thorner was dead, but Skowron had a chance of recovery. Nita Dell had vanished, and Bob Woodlee hadn't returned as yet.

Cordell and Tannehill were buying provisions in a store, when a queer prickle at the back of Cord's neck brought him around from the counter, and Tan turned with him. Bob Woodlee *had* come back. He was standing there staring narrowly at them, no greeting on his taut lips, no friendliness in his slitted eyes. His usually pleasant face was drawn and haggard. The skirt of his cord coat was pulled back behind the gun-handle on his right hip. They said, "Howdy, Woody," in their old manner of greeting him, but Bob disregarded it and went on eyeing them with hatred.

"I heard all about it," Woodlee said at last.

"Yeah, it was quite a ruckus," drawled Tannehill, trying to maintain the friendly smile that was beginning to feel foolish.

"Yes, it was. You ought to be real proud!"

Cordell leaned back on the counter, chewing his last piece of dried apricot. "What is this, Woody? You haven't gone over to Hatchet, have you?"

"Save your funny stuff, Cord. You know what it is. You had Nita Dell up in your hotel room, didn't you?"

"Sure, for a drink. She was sent up by Hatchet, so Thorner and Skowron would have an excuse to jump us."

"That's a damn lie!" Woodlee said. "Hatchet's nothin' to her. Nita's all through with Kyler Garriott. She was my girl, Cord!"

"Well, we didn't know that, Woody."

"You know it now, and you're goin' to answer for it!"

"All we did was talk anyway," said Cordell.

"Look, Woody," interposed Tannehill. "I was the one that brought her to the room, boy. She was drunk when I met her, if you want it straight."

Woodlee glared at him. "I'll get to you too, Tan."

"Don't be a damn fool, Woody," said Tannehill disgustedly.

Cordell raised his hand. "We've been friends a long time, Woody."

"That's what hurts," Woodlee gritted. "That's what makes it bad. I never thought I'd lift a gun against you, Cord, but I'm goin' to."

"Please, boys, please," muttered the distraught storekeeper. "Take your argument outside." Nobody paid the slightest attention to him.

"Don't do anythin' rash, Woody," said Cordell, earnest and pleading. "Us three been through a lot of times together."

Woodlee's laugh was dry, brittle. "Before it starts, I've got some news for you, Cord. You'd better get back to Cadmus Flats."

"What for?"

"A couple of things, Cord. Your sister's runnin' wild with Gene Garriott, they tell me. And your brother's hangin' around the girls in the Rio Belle every night!" There was a triumphant note in Woodlee's voice.

"You wouldn't lie, Woody—about that?" Cordell asked slowly.

"It's the truth. I just came from Cadmus."

Cordell glanced at Tannehill. "Maybe we better hit east instead of west, Tan."

"Anythin' you say, Cord."

Bob Woodlee motioned angrily. "First you got me to settle with."

"Woody, I've got no time for this foolishness," Cordell said wearily. "Go find your girl, nobody else wants her."

"*You* wanted her! She left a note for me, told me all about it."

"She's workin' for Hatchet, tryin' to get me killed. Can't you see that?" Cordell shook his head hopelessly. "Lay off, Woody. I don't want to have to draw on you."

"You're goin' to have to—or die without drawin'!" Woodlee grated, his face transfigured with emotion, his eyes fanatical. "Reach for it, Cord!"

Cordell straightened off the worn wood with a sigh, and looked over Woodlee's shoulder toward the front door, letting his eyes widen as he said: "We better wait and see what the sheriff wants."

Woodlee barely turned his head, snapping it quickly back to the front and clawing at his gun, but Cordell was already lunging into him, legs driving hard, lifting and throwing Woodlee backward, smashing him down and grinding him into the plank floor. Woodlee's gun was half-drawn, but Cordell had that right wrist clamped in a clutch of steel.

Fighting like a maniac, heaving, bucking and thrashing about in fury, Woodlee strove to break away, but Cordell was too strong and heavy on top of him, too swift and sure-handed. Powerless and sobbing for breath under the bigger man, Woodlee subsided at last, and Cordell tore the gun out of his numbed grasp and slid it along the boards to Tannehill.

"You ought to belt some brains into him, Cord," advised Tannehill, scooping up the gun and thrusting it under his waistband.

Cordell shook his head, climbed carefully off the other man, and stepped clear. Woodlee got up slowly, panting hard, and then hurled himself forward swinging like a madman at Cordell's face and head. Ash ducked into a crouch and crowded in to grapple him, but Woodlee flung him off with an insane burst of strength and went on flailing away, landing punches with jarring force.

Jolted, hurt, and stung to anger for the first time, Cordell went into a weaving fighting crouch and started using his own fists. Driving in he beat Woodlee's arms down, battered him back halfway across the counter. When Woodlee came scrambling off it and onto his feet again, Cordell caught him with a left, straightening him up stiff and tall. Shifting and striding forward, Cordell struck with his right, a solid smash that sounded like a cleaver on the meat-block. Woodlee's head bobbed twisting backward as his boots left the floor. He lighted on the back of his neck and shoulders at the base of the counter, his boots thudding down seconds later, his legs loosely asprawl and his body limp and senseless.

Ash Cordell, breathing hard and rubbing his knuckles, stood looking down at the unconscious bleeding man, regret and sorrow on his own bruised face. He beckoned the storekeeper. "We won't be needin' all that grub we ordered. We'll just take what we got in the saddlebags here, if you'll figure it up."

The man did so, between frightened furtive glances at the figure on the floor, and Cordell paid him, saying: "He'll be all right. Too bad it had to happen, and in your place. I want to get out before Woody comes to."

HILLHOUSE HOTEL stood on a low shelf of land overlooking the western end of Cadmus Flats, a large rambling structure with a double-galleried façade that commanded the length of Front Street, the main thoroughfare of the settlement.

Tonight the supper hour was long past and the dining room closed, the place quiet and somnolent, with a few scattered groups of guests smoking and chatting in the lobby or on the front veranda. The dishes were done, the help gone for the evening, and Ma Muller was alone in the kitchen scrubbing absent-mindedly at an already shining-clean tabletop.

She was troubled about Sue Ellen and Clem Cordell. She wished Ash would come home, yet she somehow dreaded his coming. Ash would be in a killing mood the moment he learned that Sue Ellen was keeping steady company with Gene Garriott, and it wasn't going to please Ash much

more to find Clement fooling around with those trollops in the Rio Belle.

Hearing the slow clop of hoofs outside in the road leading back to the stable, Ma Muller moved to a window. "No more meals tonight, by the old Harry," she said firmly. "I don't care who it is, they'll get nothin' to eat here!" Her worn lined face was set harshly, as she pressed it to the darkened glass, but it relaxed at once as she spotted the shadowy silhouettes of the two passing riders. Her faded blue eyes and tired features lighted up wonderfully with her smile.

"That boy knows somethin's wrong," she told herself, turning instinctively to a mirror on the wall. "He can smell trouble from one end of the Carikaree to the other." Dabbing at her wiry gray hair with veined, work-gnarled hands, she suddenly realized what she was doing and smiled cynically at her reflection. "Why, you poor old fool, you!" she murmured, with a grimace. "Primpin' like a silly schoolgirl with her first beau." Laughing in self-ridicule, she went to a cupboard and got out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses.

When Ma Muller heard their boots on the back steps, she threw open the door and made her voice harsh and scornful: "Nothin' here for you saddle-tramps! Get along down to the Longhorn and the Rio Belle where you belong!"

"Listen to the woman talk," laughed Ash Cordell, coming forward into the mellow lamplight and tossing his hat aside. He looked bigger, broader in the shoulders than ever, she thought, raw-boned and rugged but moving with that easy fluid grace. Tough with that brassy beard stubble glinting on his lean jaws, but handsome too, his fine head gleaming blond in the light, his eyes dancing gray-blue, that charming smile changing him from a somber-faced man to a merry boy.

Then she was in those long powerful arms and laughing hard to keep the tears back, holding him tight and burying her face in his wide shoulder. Ash held her tenderly, stroking her silvery head with one big brown hand. "How are you, Ma? How've you been, Ma?"

"What do you care, you wanderin' renegade?" Ma Muller pushed away from him, and extended her hand to Tannehill. "Hullo, Tan, and welcome home. I can probably thank you again for gettin' him back here in one piece."

"Not me, Ma, not this trip," Tannehill grinned. "Cord kinda pulled me out of one this time."

Cordell sighted the bottle, and made for it with a gay shout of laughter. "Ma, you're still hittin' this stuff!" he accused, with mock severity. "It ain't becomin' to a woman, Ma, as I've told you before."

Ma Muller snorted. "It ain't becomin' to a man either, but you always got your nose in a glass!" She smiled then, beaming all over her face. "Set right down to it, boys, I'm happy to have you home. I'll fry you up a nice steak. You probably haven't had a real square meal since you left Hillhouse. Wash up over there, if you haven't got out of the habit. Here's a pair of towels for you." She got busy again over the stove she had so recently cleaned up for the night, while they scrubbed their hands and faces.

Back at the table they sat down with the bottle and drank a couple of quick toasts to Ma Muller. "Where are the kids, Ma?" inquired Cordell.

"Kids? No kids here, Ash. Oh, you mean Sue Ellen and Clem? They're around somewhere. I can't keep 'em on a leash, you know."

"Is Clem gettin' kinda wild, Ma?"

"WELL, he's your brother, Ash. But I doubt if he'll ever be as skyhootin' wild and bad as you. He is takin' some interest in the girls now, I guess."

"That's bad, Ma. I'll have to look into that."

"What's bad about it? It's always been all right for you to have girls, and Lord knows you've had more than your share of 'em!"

Cordell smiled. "I wouldn't say that, Ma. But Clem's different, you know, innocent like. What about Sue Ellen? Anybody comin' courtin' these days?"

"What do you expect? She's a mighty pretty girl, son. You can't keep her caged up all her life, Ash!"

"Who is it, Ma?" Cordell's tanned face was solemn and stern.

Ma Muller turned to Tannehill. "Listen to him! Askin' questions after he's been

hellhootin' from here to breakfast all over creation. I'm the one should be askin' questions, not him!" She placed her hand on Cordell's shoulder. "They've got lives of their own to lead, Ash. You always lived yours the way you wanted to. Why don't you leave them alone?"

"They'll get hurt," Cordell said. "I don't get hurt, Ma, but they will."

"Everybody gets hurt," said Ma Muller. "Drink up now, boys, and get this food into you. Make you feel better, Ash."

"I'm all right, Ma." He smiled warmly up at her, but she knew he wasn't all right. His mother had told Ash to take care of them, and he meant to do so, insofar as he could, as long as he lived. Ma wondered if he'd heard rumors about his sister and Gene Garriott. Undoubtedly he had, the way gossip got around, as if the winds carried it to every corner of the vast Carikaree Basin.

It was always good to get back here and see Ma Muller, but the homecoming wasn't what it should have been to Ash Cordell. Unreasonably, he felt that Sue Ellen and Clem should have been there to greet him, even though they were unaware of his coming. He knew now that Bob Woodlee had been telling the truth. At this moment, his sister was somewhere with Gene Garriott and Clem was probably with some hurdy-gurdy wench. It made Ash ill, and spoiled the taste of the fine steak and hashed brown potatoes.

Ma and Tan tried to jolly him out of it, and Ash made a pretense of gaiety, but nobody was fooled by it. Afterward, Ma Muller brought them a handful of long thin cigars from the lobby case, and Cordell and Tannehill did up the dishes for her. Then they carried hot water up to the room that Ma always reserved for them. After bathing, shaving, and changing into clean clothes, they felt and looked a great deal better.

"A handsome pair of hellions," Ma Muller remarked, when they reappeared downstairs in the lobby. "If I was younger, and twins, I'd put an end to your footloose ways. Don't go down there and shoot up the town now, boys."

Leaving the front porch, they descended the grade to the level of Western Avenue, which paralleled the hotel front, and crossed into the lighted length of Front Street, stretching straight ahead of them between homes and business buildings. This end of the street was quiet, the night life area restricted mainly to the eastern side of town. Tramping the boardwalk, they passed under the wooden awnings of familiar darkened stores and came to the adobe-block bank. Court Street branched to the right with its big courthouse and trim white church. Across on the left loomed Murphy's Market, dwarfing the other shops.

They went on past other false-fronted stores, raucous saloons, and Pruett's saddle-and-harness shop. Here the street was gaudy with lights and dinning noisily, the hitch-racks lined with horses and wagons, the usual loafers loitering in the shadows. The Longhorn Saloon was before them. Over on the left were the Golden Wheel gambling emporium and the Rio Belle dance hall.

They pushed the swing-doors into the Longhorn, spoke to acquaintances here and there, and scanned the smoky interior for hostile riders from Hatchet. Not seeing any, they drifted into the long bar and settled comfortably against it, their eyes watching the back-bar mirror. Bartender Koney hailed them with casual good cheer and set up a bottle and two small glasses.

"Any Hatchet in town tonight?" asked Cordell.

"Kyler was in earlier with Laidlaw and Hamrick. Ain't seen anybody else."

"Clem been around, Koney?"

The little bartender looked slightly uncomfortable. "Not in here, Ash. Might be over to the Rio. You boys are lookin' fit and sharp."

"Hard steady work," drawled Tannehill. "That's the secret."

"Ha, ha," Koney said, expressionless, his narrow balding head moistly aglitter. "You got any more funny stories." He leaned across toward them. "Heard the huntin' was pretty good out Trelhaven way."

"Not bad, Koney," said Cordell.

"They're a little thicker around these parts. A man could almost close his eyes and hit one of 'em anytime. I guess you boys know where I stand on the matter."

"Sure, Koney, and we're glad to know it."

Koney pushed their money back across the wood, poured them another round, and moved away down the bar. They saluted him

in the mirror, tossed off the drinks, and went outside. After surveying the street with slow care, they crossed diagonally toward the Rio Belle, glancing at the horses racked there. Three of them bore the Hatchet brand, and a sudden fear chilled Ash Cordell. They might figure on taking his brother Clement, to even up for Thorner and Skowron. That would be like Kyler Garriott. Then he recalled that Clem didn't pack a gun, unless he'd started to recently. Even Kyler would hesitate about throwing down on an unarmed man.

The music hit them in the face with its brassy blare, and the floor was crowded with gaily twirling couples, the bright dresses of the girls in contrast to the somber garb of the men. Standing at the rail, Cordell and Tannehill looked the place over, not seeing Clem at first. Two house girls came over with false smiles of welcome, and Tannehill grinned back at them, but Cordell waved them away without a glance. Then he spotted Kyler Garriott at the bar, Hamrick and Laidlaw on either side of him.

Kyler was backed against the wood with a drink in his hand, a towering lanky figure with wide spare shoulders. He was dressed in black, except for a white hat and neckpiece, the two bone-handled guns and silver-ornamented boots. His head was rather small, sleek and black under the pushed-back hat, with an odd reptilian thrust to it.

Kyler Garriott was watching a corner of the dance floor, his thin ferret-face drawn sharper than ever, his black eyes narrowed and shining with an oily luster. He looked deadly, and he was. Kyler was rated superior to any of the professional gunmen his father hired, except possibly the mysterious Hodkey.

THE two men with him were just about as expert with their guns. Laidlaw looked like anything but a killer, slim and blond, a smiling boy with a smooth clear face that was almost girlish, almost beautiful. They called him Pretty Boy, and there was no disparagement in the term. His innocent delicate appearance had led many hardcase strangers into insulting him, calling him, reaching—and thereby committing suicide.

Hamrick was quite the opposite, broad, massive and burly, a bull of a man with a fighting bull's ferocity, courage and driving power. For variety, it was said, Hamrick sometimes killed opponents with his bare hands. He had shaggy auburn hair and a broad flat face, broken-nosed, seamed with scars, brutal-jawed. Red Hamrick was in no way pretty, but like Laidlaw he ranked with the top gun-sharps of Hatchet.

Cordell followed Kyler Garriott's concentrated gaze and located the couple he was staring at, just as Tannehill clutched Cord's arm, swearing and pointing into the same corner. The man was Clem, and the girl was Nita Dell, perky and flirty, vivid and voluptuous, pressing her full flowing curves against her partner. Ash Cordell cursed viciously, his biceps swelling taut under Tan's fingers.

"That poor kid," murmured Ash. "With a woman like that, what chance would Clem have?"

"She's givin' him the treatment," Tannehill drawled. "I wonder how many men she's got killed in her time?"

"It's a good thing we rode this way, Tan," said Ash. "I'm goin' over there. Cover my back, Tanny."

"Sure, Cord. I got those three at the bar tagged."

Ash slipped easily through the whirling couples, weaving his way toward that far corner. The music ceased before he got there, but Nita remained close to Clem, smiling up at him with pouted crimson lips, her dark eyes filled with a swooning look, her full body swaying seductively. Clem acted stunned, bedazzled and wholly entranced. The sight of him that way with a strumpet like Nita, set off a blazing rage in Ash Cordell.

Clement looked up, surprised and a bit guilty, at his big brother's approach. He was a stocky-built young man with a clean, frank, boyish face, wavy brown hair, darker than Ash's, and large brown eyes of velvet softness. His features were straight and regular, and there was a look of shining cleanness about him.

"Why, Ash," he said, embarrassed but glad as he reached out a hand. "It's good to see you back, Ash. Here, I want you to meet—"

"We've met, Clem," said Aash, shaking his hand and staring steadily at the girl, her musky perfume reminding him of two men

lying in a dim powder-reeking hotel corridor. "Can I have the next dance?"

"Sure, Ash." Clem looked from one to the other. "Go right ahead."

"Have you got a ticket, Cord?" asked Nita tauntingly.

"I'll use one of Clem's."

"In Trelhaven you wouldn't dance at all."

"I dance better here maybe."

Nita smiled sweetly at him. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Cord."

"Or maybe never," Ash said.

The music was starting up when Kyler Garriott arrived, ignoring the brothers at first, eyeing the girl with dark menace. "This is my dance, Nita."

"You're a little late, Kyler." She was already in Ash's arms and circling slowly out of the corner to the tune of *Gathering the Myrtle with Mary*. Kyler watched them a moment, and then turned on Clem, his weasel-face thrusting sharply down at the smaller man.

"I told you to keep away from her, Clem."

Clem smiled with sober good nature. "I'm not takin' orders from you Kyler. I'll stay away when Nita tells me to herself."

Kyler stood with habitual Garriott arrogance, hands on hips and elbows spread wide, taller than Ash or anybody else on the floor, an insolent smile on his narrow bony face. He and Clem were of an age, as was the case with Gene Garriott and Ash, but Kyler seemed much older, a hard-bitten man of the world towering over a simple naive boy.

"It's too bad you never grew up enough to carry a gun, Clem," said Kyler.

"I've got one," Clem said quietly. "If I have to, I can use it."

"You're liable to have to, boy. I'm gettin' sick of havin' you Cordells cuttin' in on my women. Ash moved in on Laura Delsing, and now you're hornin' in on Nita. I ought to beat your curly head off, boy."

"You should've tried it before Ash got back."

Kyler laughed contemptuously. "You goin' to spend all your life hidin' behind your big brother's back? He sure must get tired of nurse-maidin' a pup like you!"

Clem's cheeks colored up hotly. "I'll wear that gun for you hereafter, Kyler. I don't take that kind of talk from anybody."

"That's good," Kyler said. "When I see you with a gun on, Clem, you're dead."

KYLER laughed and strode back toward the bar. Watching Kyler's lanky high-shouldered back, Clement Cordell felt cold and shaken, his legs trembling so that he was thankful to find an empty chair at a nearby table. He had been practicing with a six-gun, but he'd never fired at any living thing. He didn't even like to think about it.

On the dance floor, Nita was gazing up at his brother now with an archly challenging expression. "Did you see Bob Woodlee before you left Trelhaven?" she asked guilelessly.

"Yes, but I didn't kill him or let him kill me. Sorry to disappoint you."

"What in the world are you talkin' about?" She was properly indignant.

"You drove Woodlee crazy," Ash said coldly. "Now you're workin' on my brother. But you're all done there, Nita. You aren't goin' to see any more of Clem."

"Is that so? Who are you to order me around? Clem's of age and I happen to like him. He's a lot better lookin' than you are, big brother. Maybe that's why you always tromped him down, treated him like a baby."

"I'm not very pretty," smiled Ash. "Neither is Kyler Garriott."

Nita laughed. "But Kyler's rich. Kyler's got all kinds of money!"

Ash looked down at her sensual face. "There ought to be a law against women like you." In time to the jangling music, he was swinging her gradually nearer the bar.

"I'm a naughty girl," she giggled, thrusting her firm swelling figure against him with an almost scalding pressure. "But I can be awful nice, Cord. I know how to make a man mighty happy!"

"And mighty dead," Ash said grimly, spinning her ever closer to the opening in the rail before the bar. The Hatchet trio watched them across the railing, while Tannehill and Clem drifted in that direction.

"What a thing to say!" exclaimed the girl. "I can be real sweet to a man, Cord, all sugar and spice."

"Be sweet to Kyler then!" Ash said, turning her loose and swinging her around by the wrist, flinging her on toward the three Garriott men at the bar.

"There she is, Kyler. Ride closer herd on her, if you want to hold onto her. And keep her off my brother's neck."

"You're askin' for it, Cord," said Kyler. "You been askin' for it a long time now." The two Hatchet men stepped up on either side of him.

"Let's have it then," Ash Cordell said. "You've got your usual odds, Kyler."

Tannehill sauntered alongside of Ash, long and loose-limbed with an amber flare lighting his eyes, a reckless grin curving his lips. "Evens them up some, Cord," he drawled. "Makes 'em too even for Hatchet." And Clem moved in at Tannehill's shoulder, weaponless but determined to stand by them.

Couples stopped dancing to stare at this tense tableau, the music broke off discordantly, and people scrambled out of the line of fire. Three against three they faced one another in the smoke-layered lamplight, but there were six guns on the Hatchet side and only two showing for the Cordells. Silent and motionless they stood there, hatred a tangible evil thing between the two lines, until the strain was becoming unbearable. . . And a genial slurring voice broke it:

"What's all the fuss here? This ain't no way to enjoy a dance, boys." Sheriff Rubeling shook his head sorrowfully. "Ash, I didn't know you was back home. You and trouble are still ridin' together, I see."

"The name's Tannehill, Rube," grinned Tan in wry protest.

"Didn't mean you exactly, Tan. Trouble in general just naturally seems to trail Ash around. Now you Hatchet boys stand back to the bar, and I'll take a walk in the air with these three boys." He signaled the orchestra to strike up the music, and motioned the dancers back into action. Sheriff Rubeling was a commanding figure, a huge rawboned man even taller than Kyler, with the battle-scarred face of a hawk, the piercing eyes of an eagle. His mouth was like a steel-trap, and a large chew of tobacco bulged one seamed leathery cheek.

Clem stood rooted gazing at Nita, but her luminous dark eyes were fixed on Kyler. Ash struck him sharply on the shoulder, and Clem turned and followed them.

Rubeling paused thoughtfully on the slat walk outside. "I'll buy you boys a drink in the Longhorn. Ash, what is this feelin' you've got against the Garriotts? It's goin' to bring on killin' in time, Ash, and it don't seem right after old Gurney took you folks in and raised you like his own kids on Hatchet. It worries me considerable, Ash, and it has for a long time. You ought to be friendly, or at least sociable with the Garriotts, seein' as how Sue Ellen and Gene are goin' steady together."

"Never, Rube," said Ash, his low voice charged with emotion. "I'm goin' to bust that up. I won't have my sister with a Garriott."

"Listen, Ash, I'm not makin' any brief for Gurney and Kyler, but Gene's a whole lot different. So far as I know Gene never warred on the nesters, or ran with the gun-pack at all. I don't see where a girl hereabouts could do much better than Gene, honest I don't!"

"He's a Garriott, that's enough. He's not for Sue Ellen."

"Hellfire and damnation, man!" growled Sheriff Rubeling. "If the girl loves Gene, you can't change it or stop it."

"Yes, I can, Rube," said Ash gently, "And I sure as hell will."

"What's wrong with Gene Garriott, outside of your not likin' him?"

"He's no good. None of the Garriots are any good. Rich and big and powerful, yes, but rotten inside, rotten way through. You know what they've done, Rube, as well as I do. The homesteaders they've driven off and burnt out and killed. The herds they've stolen, the land they've grabbed, the small ranches they've swallowed up. The families they've split and broken and ruined."

"You got proof of all that, Ash?" inquired Rubeling dryly.

"I've seen some things and heard a lot of others. I saw what they did to the Woodlees up on the Bittersweet. Shot down the father and mother, burned the house with them in it, wounded and screamin'. Flogged young Woody half-to-death."

Rubeling spat and swallowed. "That was a bad one, I know, but we had no proof who did it. There's always talk against people

like the Garriotts. The law can't go on guesswork or hearsay, Ash."

"I'm not blamin' you or your office, Rube. I know how things are."

"Accordin' to what you say, boy, I ain't doin' my duty here."

"I'm not sayin' that, Rube," protested Ash. "I do say the Garriotts get away with a lot that other folks couldn't. Because they own the whole east end of the valley, because they're so big and wealthy and strong. It's like they're beyond the law."

There was restrained anger in the sheriff's reply: "Nobody's beyond the law! Seems to me you and Tan got off pretty easy over in Trelhaven, when it comes to that."

"It was self defense, Rube. They climbed us and we had to shoot or die. But if it happened here, we'd have been tried for murder, I reckon, if we weren't hung before the trial."

"You mean this is a Garriott town, and I'm a Garriott man?"

Ash Cordell shook his head. "I don't think you're a Garriott man at heart, Rube. But your hands are pretty well tied, aren't they?"

"In public office, any man's hands are tied to some extent, I suppose," Rubeling said wearily, glumly. "I can't stop all the feudin' and fightin' in the Carikaree. What do you want me to do, Ash?" He seemed abruptly old and tired, his great height diminished, the hawklike face sunken with sadness.

Ash smiled gravely. "Well, you *could* deputize Tan and me."

Rubeling spat a stream of tobacco juice. "I got all the deputies I can carry, and you know it, Ash. Besides, you two boys got a reputation for hell-raisin' that don't exactly fit behind a badge."

"And Hatchet wouldn't stand for it either, Rube," needled Ash.

"Hellfire and corruption!" the sheriff said. "I've got a full crew of deputies, and that's all there is to it."

"Sure, and not a one of 'em would lift a gun against the Garriotts! Not even if they caught 'em changin' a brand, holdin' up a stage, or robbin' the bank." Ash was supremely scornful.

"Now I got a couple or three pretty good boys, Ash. You take Paynter and Maddern and Shokes. They wouldn't care much for that kind of talk, even from you, Ash."

Ash laughed. "You can tell 'em I said it, Rube. They know where I live."

"You're too tough for your own good, son," grumbled Rubeling, and sighed deeply. "Let's get to that drink in the Longhorn. All this gabbin'grows a thirst."

"One thing I wish you'd bear in mind, Rube," said Ash. "Hatchet's been threatenin' Dan Delsing on Wagon Mound."

Rubeling spat viciously. "Anybody that harms the Delsings is in trouble with me, Ash, Garriotts or whatever they are!"

V

CADMUS FLATS slumbered under the moon. The Hillhouse Hotel was also asleep on its westerly bench, except for Ash Cordell who sat alone in the darkened lobby. Ma Muller and her employees and patrons had long since retired. Clem and Tannehill had finally gone up to bed, at Ash's insistence. Lounging in a deep leather chair before the large plateglass window, Ash Cordell smoked a cigar and watched the moonlight gild the rooftops of the town with silver. He was waiting for his sister Sue Ellen and Gene Garriott. His lazy slouching attitude belied the emotions that were seething within him.

He could see straight down the empty moonlit expanse of Front Street, almost to the East Bridge over the Carikaree River, and the road that led eastward past Blue Butte to Hatchet. To the left, North Bridge was visible, and beyond it the trail running northeast to Chimney Rocks and Wagon Mound. To the right, he saw the landmarks of Court Street, the bulk of the courthouse, the square belfry and tapering spire of the church, that had been designed after the white churches of New England and looked a bit out-of-place in this Western community.

Ash Cordell perceived these things only abstractedly, for his mind had gone back to the youthful days on Hatchet. Even seventeen years ago the ranch had been enormous, a veritable town in itself, centered about the Big House, a great limestone structure. There were immense frame barns and stables, long bunkhouses of adobe and wood, rows of cabins for privileged employees with families, a large cookshack and

dining hall, and an extensive array of corrals, sheds and out-buildings. Hatchet had its own general store, saloon, blacksmith shop, and even a schoolhouse that also served as a church. To children reared in a mountain wilderness, it seemed at first like a crowded, noisy, swarming city, overwhelming and bewildering them.

Old Gurney Garriott gave them rooms in the Big House, and they took their meals with the family. Gurney and his tall, cold, patrician wife obviously meant to raise them impartially with their own sons, but it never quite came off that way. They went to school and played with the Garriott boys and other Hatchet children, and apparently received the same consideration and treatment, privileges and discipline that Gene and Kyler did. But there was natural and inevitable differentiation, and Ash never liked it or felt at home there. The younger Cordells, remembering little of their previous years, accepted this new order of things much easier and better than Ash was able to.

Gene and Kyler were forever taunting them: "You ain't Garriotts! You ain't anybody! You're just found kids!" And Ash was always fighting them, one at a time or both together, taking his lickings and going back for more. Occasionally Clem pitched in but he wasn't much help, and Ash was seldom without blackened eyes or cut lips. Ash never cried or complained, and even when questioned by Gurney and his wife he remained stubbornly silent, refusing to blame the Garriott brothers. Ash was getting tougher and stronger all the while. At fifteen or sixteen, Gene had trouble in whipping him alone, despite Gene's advantage in size, and generally Kyler joined in to make sure that Ash got a sound drubbing.

Ash Cordell had hated the Garriott boys instinctively from the start, and this hatred increased with every thrashing he took at their hands. At seventeen, Ash was becoming very hard to handle, unruly, rebellious and wild as a mustang, at home, in school and abroad. When Gurney called him onto the carpet, Ash lashhed out at him: "Who am I? Who were my folks? What happened up in the mountains? I want to know, I've got to know!" Old Gurney was surprisingly gentle and kind, in that instance, but he couldn't furnish any information. Had never heard of the Cordell family; didn't even know which mountains they had come out of. Gurney tried to soothe the boy, advising him to forget all about the tragic past and concentrate on living his own life.

"You're good, Ash, and you can go a long way on Hatchet," said Gurney. "You can already ride and rope and shoot better than some of my regular hands. It seems to come natural to you, boy. You can be a tophand at twenty-one, the rate you're comin' along, and a wagon boss or better at twenty-five."

But Ash didn't care about his future prospects. He wanted to learn the story of his family and himself, establish an identity and a background, feel whole and complete and normal. The one thing he did like about Hatchet, however, was the opportunity to train and develop himself in the handling of horses and cattle, ropes and guns. At eighteen, Ash Cordell was an expert at cutting, roping and branding. He could twist broncs in the breaking corral, build a point and ride it on the trail-drives to the railhead, make river crossings with a herd. He read sign like an Indian scout on the trail, and handled guns as if he'd been born with a Colt in his clasp.

Ash was eighteen when he went back to the schoolhouse one afternoon to get a book he had forgotten, and found Sue Ellen struggling in the arms of Gene Garriott, who was so engrossed in kissing the fourteen-year-old girl that he never heard Ash come in. Ripping them apart, Ash spun Gene around, smashed him in the face, and went after the bigger boy with wildcat fury. That was the first time Ash ever beat Gene, and he did a beautiful job of it, belting him all over the room, bouncing him off the walls, knocking him down, never stopping until Gene was unconscious on the floor, a battered bleeding hulk.

THAT evening old Gurney called Ash into his office, with the intentions of taking a quirt to him, but when Ash saw him pick up the whip he pulled a gun out of his waistband. Gurney, realizing that the boy would use that gun if he had to, flung the quirt down and ordered Ash off the premises, once and for all.

"Why sure," Ash said smiling thinly. "Nothin' I'd like better than to get the stink of Hatchet out of my head. I'll be back for my brother and sister before long, and if Gene has laid so much as a finger on Sue Ellen, I'll kill him! And I'll kill you or anybody else that tries to stop me!"

"You're goin' to end with a rope around your neck, boy," Gurney told him.

"Maybe so. But there won't be any Garriotts left around to see it."

"How can you feel that way toward us, boy? After all we've done for you and your brother and sister."

"I don't rightly know," Ash said gravely. "But I got a feelin' you've done us more harm than you can ever make up for."

"What do you mean, you young idiot?"

"You know what happened to our folks, and you know who did it."

Old Gurney had raged and cursed at this. "How would I know, you ungrateful kid. I never set eyes on your folks. I don't know anybody that ever did. For all I know, and from the way you act, you might've been spawned of a mountain lion. Get out now and stay out of my sight, before I have you shot like the back-bitin' coyote you are!"

"Gladly," said Ash. "But see that my sister and brother are treated right, mister!"

Ash had said his goodbys, gathered his gear, and gone to the stable for the horse Gurney had given him, when the old monarch changed his mind and decided to have the boy held. Two gunhands went out to stop young Cordell, but Ash got the drop on them, took their gun-belts, and went out to Hatchet at a wild gallop. Gurney ordered a pursuit, and then cancelled it before the men could saddle up. There'd be plenty of time to take that crazy kid, if he had to be taken. And Gurney knew it would come to that eventually.

So Ash Cordell had broken loose on his own at eighteen, and not long after that Ma Muller had legally adopted the three Cordells, a move that Gurney never made. And Sheriff Rubeling had transferred Sue Ellen and Clement from Hatchet to the Hillhouse in Cadmus Flats.

At times Ash thought he should have been somewhat grateful to the Garriotts, after all, for with all its drawbacks Hatchet had done a lot for the Cordell children. They had been educated there, better than most in this frontier land. They had been well-fed and well-clothed, learned polite company manners, how to talk and act and dress. They had grown up strong and straight and healthy, and Ash, at least, had acquired a trade there that fitted him for life in the West.

But always inside him was that instinctive hatred and distrust of the Garriotts, and the firm belief that there was some ulterior and evil motive behind Gurney's philanthropy . . .

Now shadows fell across the broad porch steps, and Ash Cordell straightened in his chair. Sue Ellen and Gene Garriott came into view, the girl looking small and dainty beside the hulking frame of the man. Ash could see them clearly in the moonlight, their arms linked, their faces turned raptly to one another, smiling, happy and intimate. Ash's fists knotted until his arms ached numbly to the elbow, and his teeth bit way through the cigar.

Gene had grown big and broad and powerful, like old Gurney, and he looked handsome with the black curls tousled on his forehead, his features straight, strong and regular, his smile laden with the Garriott charm that Kyler had missed out on entirely. They kissed and turned to look at the moonlit town, their arms around each other, and Ash Cordell winced as if he had been struck across the face.

Slowly, reluctant to part, they entered the dark lobby and paused for a farewell embrace. Ash came to his feet and dropped the mangled cigar butt, feeling strangely naked without the gun dragging on his hips. He had hung up the gun because he didn't want to kill Gene Garriott—yet. In deference to his sister, Ash meant to give Gene a chance. Startled, the couple separated and whirled staring, as he strode toward them in the faint light.

"Ash!" cried Sue Ellen, running to him and throwing her arms about his neck, raising her face to him.

But her brother turned his head before her lips reached his mouth. "Not after him, Sue."

"Oh, Ash!" she sighed, desperate and forlorn. "Please, Ash, *don't*—"

But Ash had set her aside and was moving on toward Gene Garriott, who stood

waiting and watchful, his boots apart and his hands half-lifted, ready. Gene's smile was gone, and muscles bunched along his heavy jawbones, his eyes darkly intense. He wore a beautifully tailored suit of rich gray broadcloth. There was no gun in sight, but he probably had one in a shoulder holster.

"You know what happened the last few times I found you two together," Ash said. "It won't happen tonight if you get out, Gene, and never come back."

"It's no use, Ash." Gene shook his curly head. "You aren't running our lives any more. This is our affair, Sue's and mine. You've got nothing to say about it. We're going to get married soon."

"You'll never live that long," Ash told him. "You'd better forget all about it, Gene. Stick to those half-breed girls you and Kyler have out Blue Butte way."

Gene Garriott's right hand thrust toward his left armpit.

"I haven't got a gun on," Ash said calmly. "I was afraid I'd kill you if I wore a gun."

"Well, I couldn't shoot you in front of your sister anyway. I imagine you figured on that too, Ash." He took off the gray coat, unhooked the shoulder holster, and tossed them into the nearest chair. "I don't need a gun either. You'll never whip me again, Ash. But I suppose you'll insist on trying."

SUE ELLEN ran and clung to Gene Garriott. "No, no, no!" she implored. "Please go, Gene, and let me talk to Ash. Don't fight here, Gene, please don't!"

"Might as well be here and now," Gene said grimly, forcing her gently aside. "There are more sensible civilized ways, but none that Ash understands."

Ash laughed mockingly. "Sensible and civilized, the way you Garriotts deal with little homesteaders and small ranchers? Come on, you hypocrite, put up your hands!"

"I never held with a lot of things Hatchet does. I never took part in any of those range wars, Ash. But I'm ready to fight you, if you're bound to have it."

"You're noble, Gene," said Ash, reaching out with casual contempt and slapping that handsome face.

It was a mistake, for Gene was striking with sudden speed as Ash slapped him, landing heavily on the jaw, rocking Ash's head back, stunning him. Before Ash could recover, Gene was on top of him slugging hard, driving him back with unleashed fury. Garriott was three inches taller and thirty pounds heavier, fast for a man of his size, and Ash couldn't hold him off long enough to regain equilibrium.

Something caught the back of Ash Cordell's legs and he went over backward, the floor smashing his shoulders and beating the breath from his lungs. Gene was hurtling down on top of him, but Ash got his legs up in time to catch that ponderous weight on his boots and kick Gene on overhead to fall with a jarring crash that shook the entire building. Rolling and springing catlike to his feet, Cordell was up first and waiting in a balanced crouch, waiting until Garriott came up, then driving in and hitting him, left and right to the face, lifting Gene back against the lobby counter, dropping him heavily at the foot of it.

Garriott floundered there, shaken and hurt as Ash had been, but thrashing out with his booted legs as Cordell closed in. Ash took one bootheel on the kneecap, the other in the groin, and stumbled off in crippled agony. Gene swung around onto hands and knees, and came in a low sweeping rush along the floor. Still bent with cramping pain, Cordell lifted his knee wickedly into that oncoming face and clubbed both fists to the sides of the head. Garriott stopped short and crumpled back, gasping and groaning, but Ash was too racked with the anguish in his groin to follow up the advantage.

Scrabbling frantically on the hardwood boards, Gene Garriott reared up and rushed forward, mighty arms flailing. Ducking in under, Ash Cordell ripped both hands into the waistline, sinking them deep, and Gene's breath sobbed raggedly out as he doubled with the jolting impacts.

Straightening up and standing off, Cordell measured his enemy with cold precision, stabbing him upright with a left, pouring all his coordinated power into a whipping overhand right. It landed with a brutal smash, and Ash felt the shock way to his shoulder. Garriott's curly head jerked far back and his body followed it down, bouncing on the floor, skidding on his shoulders until his skull thumped the base-

board of the office desk.

"That's enough, Ash!" cried Sue Ellen, huddled on the wall.

"Maybe," panted Cordell. "Maybe not." He was swaying slightly himself, lungs pumping and heart hammering, the pain still knifing through his groin and kneecap. He tasted blood in his mouth, and his face felt numbed and enormously swollen with the left eye bruised and closing. His hands ached as if the knucklebones were splintered.

It would have been enough for most men, but Garriott was getting up, slowly and uncertainly, supporting himself on the counter, his battered face glistening darkly with blood. Ash waited, needing the rest and giving a game opponent chance to recover. Garriott hurled himself forward all at once, and Ash met him squarely, slamming away until their weary arms interlocked. Clinching and grappling, they wrestled back and forth, upsetting chairs and tables. Garriott brought a knee up into Cordell's aching abdomen, and Ash butted his head viciously into Gene's chin.

They broke and circled groggily. Garriott swung round-armed, but Cordell was sliding inside and slashing straight away, beating the giant back. A left lashed Gene against the wall, his hands dropping as he bounced forward again. Ash hooked him left and right, and the big man tottered on jacking knees. Ash threw everything into a shattering right. Garriott stiffened up high, pawing the air blindly, and toppled forward with the slow majestic finality of a great tree chopped down, landing on his bloody face and shuddering into stillness.

"No more, Ash, no more!" pleaded Sue Ellen, flinging herself frantically on her brother. "Don't touch him again, Ash. I'll —I'll hate you, if you do!"

Ash looked at her in dull surprise. "Reckon—that's—enough," he gasped painfully, shaking his sweaty head and massaging his raw knuckles, feeling weak and sick now that it was over. Sue Ellen ran and knelt beside Gene, then hurried to the kitchen and came back with a basin of water and a towel. Ash walked around in slow uneven circles while she bathed Garriott's face and head, thinking bitterly: *She went right to him. She doesn't care if I'm hurt or not. She's in love with that Garriott. Why do things have to happen like that? All the men in the world, and she has to pick him.*

Gene was soon on his feet and mumbling through mashed lacerated lips: "All right, Ash, you won. But it won't—do you—any good. You can't keep me away from Sue."

"I'll kill you then," Ash said.

"You think—you're bullet-proof?" Gene asked through the blood-soaked towel.

"Enough to stand against any Garriott."

"You can't — break this up — Ash. Nothing can—ever."

"The next time it'll be with guns," Ash told him. "The next time I see you, start reachin'."

Sue Ellen spoke, quite evenly in spite of her weeping: "Ash, will you please leave us alone now? You whipped him. You've done enough. You should be satisfied, Ash."

"All right, Sue," he said flatly. "But tell him not to come back while I'm here. I've threatened before. Next time I'll shoot him." Ash Cordell crossed to the stairway and started climbing, holding onto the banister and lifting one foot after the other, feeling utterly spent and exhausted, torn and twisted unhappy inside. There was no satisfaction in beating Gene this time, not with Sue Ellen loving him, standing with him against her brother.

THINGS were a bit strained, awkward and unpleasant in the Hillhouse Hotel. There had been a drastic change during Ash's latest absence. Sue Ellen and Clement had grown up and away from him. The brawl with Gene Garriott had left a wide and serious breach between Sue and Ash, while Clem was withdrawn, preoccupied and resentful over the Nita Dell matter. Hillhouse wasn't the same homelike place at all, with that constant worry etching Ma Muller's face, and Ash Cordell was saddened and lonely, missing Laura Delsing more than ever. He supposed it was inevitable for brothers and sisters to drift apart, as the years passed, but that didn't lessen the hurt of it in Ash.

On this morning, Ash Cordell was wandering in moody disconsolation about the hotel and the grounds of the small plateau. Tannehill, oppressed by the strained relations at the hotel, had wandered downtown to maybe try his luck in a few turns at the

Golden Wheel. Ma Muller and Sue Ellen were busy with their duties within the establishment, and Clem had disappeared. Ash paced outside through sunlight and shadow, a tall, somber, brooding figure.

Restless and irritable, Ash wished he and Tan had gone ahead into the Madrelinos to search for Cathedral Valley. Coming back to Cadmus had served no purpose, other than to estrange himself from his sister and brother. Sue Ellen had no intention of giving up Gene Garriott, and Clem would probably slip back to the Rio Belle after Nita Dell at the first opportunity . . . Ash Cordell's whole existence suddenly seemed empty and pointless, without meaning or purpose. He might as well leave Sue and Clem to their fates, as they wanted it, and continue his quest for that lost upland valley. At least, when hunting for that, his life had some direction and objective.

"What you need is a job, Ash boy," Ma Muller had told him.

Ash shook his bronze-colored head. "I wasn't cut out to work for other men and take orders all my life, Ma. I wouldn't mind workin' for myself now."

"You're proud as Lucifer and twice as independent!" Ma said. "You've got to have a stake, Ash, in order to work for yourself."

"That's what's the matter, Ma," grinned Ash wryly.

Ash sauntered back into the dusty dimness of the stable, with its smell of hay and horses and leather. Catching a flicker of motion in the rear, he drifted that way and came upon Clement, a gun-belt strapped on, practicing his draw. Clem turned, startled and angered, coloring and smiling sheepishly when he saw his big brother there watching him.

"It's better if you do some shootin' at the end of your draw, Clem," said Ash kindly. "More practical that way."

"Can't afford to waste shells," Clem protested, painfully embarrassed. "Just limberin' up anyway, Ash."

"That isn't for you, Clem. That's my line, kid, and about all I'm good for. You aren't plannin' to pack a gun around, are you?"

"Looks like I'll have to, Ash. Unless I want Kyler Garriott runnin' me right out of town."

"Listen, Clem, and don't get mad," Ash said patiently. "That Nita Dell is no damn good, and I know it for a fact. You heard about the shootin' in Trelhaven? She started that deliberate, settin' Tan and me up for the Hatchet gunmen to burn down, but luck was with us. You remember Bob Woodlee? Well, she had Woody roped for fair, and he was even figurin' on marryin' her. She tried to set Woody gunnin' for me, and it almost worked out, Woody was that far gone on her. Now she's leadin' you on, playin' you off against Kyler, fixin' you up to get shot, Clem. It's nothin' but a game to her, a game she's playin' for Hatchet."

"Maybe, Ash, I don't know about that. Just the same I can't let Kyler chase me out of Cadmus."

"Let me take care of the Garriotts, kid," Ash said. "Guns are my business. That Kyler's supposed to be pretty hot with a six. You can't pick up in a few weeks what a man has got in a lifetime, Clem. Look here, kid." Ash's right hand flicked and the long-barreled Colt flashed up in it, as if by magic. "You couldn't match that, Clem. But Kyler Garriott could, or come close to it."

Clem was silent, sullen, staring at the straw-littered floor.

"I don't want you wearin' a gun," Ash went on firmly. "If you put on a gun, it's suicide, Clem. Kyler won't kill you unless you're carryin' a gun."

"He'll shame me to death though," muttered Clem, in abject misery.

"I'll tend to Kyler."

"But you won't always be here, Ash."

"I'll be here enough to handle the Garriotts."

Clement's brown eyes darkened and his fine head lifted. "A man has to stand up for himself sometime!"

"Sure, Clem," smiled Ash. "But you don't have to take a gun against a trained gun-fighter to prove yourself. Leave that for me, Clem." He slapped the boy's stalwart shoulder. "I don't want my favorite brother gettin' hurt."

Ash left the barn, and Clem went back to practicing his draw harder than ever. The smooth flawless speed of Ash's motion had discouraged him, but Clem wasn't going to back down for Kyler Garriott or anybody else. He was a good target shot, and in time he'd learn to shoot fast. Someday he'd

show Ash that he was a man in his own right. Pleasant boyish face set in a grim scowl, Clem crouched and drew time and again, picturing himself wreathed in powder-smoke with Kyler Garriott, gun only half-way out, dying at his feet, and people murmuring in hoarse awed tones: "Faster'n lightning, that Clem Cordell! Faster'n his big brother Ash, even!"

IN THE middle of the afternoon, there was nothing to do around the hotel and Sue Ellen had signified her willingness to stay in the lobby. Clem decided to walk downtown, have a beer or two, and perhaps catch a glimpse of Nita Dell. Maybe the girl was no good, like Ash said, but she was in his blood like liquid-fire, in his head like exotic perfume and pulsing music. Nothing had ever stirred and enthralled him as Nita did, made him feel so big and strong, handsome and important. Remembering the sweet fire of her mouth, the feeling of her soft firm body in his arms, Clem shivered with an inner agony of delight and craving. He needed Nita Dell, and he needed the way she made him feel, alive, vibrant, surging with vital power.

Ash and Tan had gone riding somewhere out in the country, and Ma Muller was taking her afternoon nap. In his room, Clem shaved and washed scrupulously, put on clean trousers, dress-up boots, and a new soft gray shirt checked with blue. He knotted a blue scarf at his throat, combed and brushed his wavy brown hair carefully, and put on his best hat. Standing in thoughtful debate, he eyed the gun-belt on its wall peg for a long irresolute space. Then with a defiant muttered curse, he snatched down the belt and buckled it about his sturdy hips. He was too old to be treated like a kid any longer, to be ordered around by his big brother. He was twenty-five.

Sue Ellen raised her golden head from a book, as Clem descended into the lobby. "My, my, you must think it's Saturday, Clement!" she chided good-naturedly, a fond smile on her delicately chiseled face. "And what's that gun for? To impress the girls in the Rio Belle?"

"Aw, shut up, Sue," said Clem, grinning in spite of his attempt at sternness, hurrying out before she could throw any more taunts at him, eager at the sight of the sun-drenched town lying below the shelf.

Approaching the Longhorn, Clem wondered whether to drop in for a beer and a chat with Koney, or cross to the dance hall and see if Nita was around. The mid-afternoon quiet was a good time to talk with her, if she wasn't still in bed or out wth Kyler. He hadn't fully decided when the swing-doors of the Longhorn opened, and Laidlaw and Hamrick swaggered out and stood in front of him, blocking the plank walk and looking Clem up and down with amusement.

"He's kinda cute, Red," drawled Laidlaw, cocking his fair head and smiling his angelic smile.

"And look at that shootin' iron on him!" Hamrick laughed, tossing his auburn head on those brawny shoulders. "The kid's sure growin' up and feelin' his oats."

Clem's mouth thinned tight. "Get out of my way!"

"Just listen to that," Laidlaw said. "A real hardcase kid, if I ever saw one."

"Maybe we better move, Laid," suggested Hamrick, "before he turns that six-shooter loose on us."

"Maybe we had," agreed Laidlaw. "He's wearin' a mean ornery look today. These young buckaroos get that way the minute they sprout a gun."

The fury was mounting red and hot in Clem Cordell, but he knew it was foolish to draw against these two gun-slicks. He wished now he had left the gun at home. With the bare hands he could take Pretty Boy Laidlaw, he thought, although he'd have little chance against the bull-like Hamrick. He had fought with his fists on infrequent occasions, but this gun business was altogether new to him. Clem stood there in a daze, his cheeks flushed and burning, his ears rimmed with fire. He wished desperately that Ash and Tan would come along. Sick and hollow inside, Clem decided there was nothing to do but back down and walk around them into the street, much as he hated to let them force him off the sidewalk.

"He's mine, boys," rasped a voice from behind Clement, the voice of Kyler Garriott. "So you're lookin' for a fight, Clem? Well, turn around and take it, sucker!"

Clem stood frozen in his tracks, as Ham-

rick and Laidlaw shifted out of line. It was all pre-arranged, Clem realized, nerving himself to make a move. He was a dead man. An icy chill traced his spine and tightened his scalp. Teeth grating on edge, Clem wheeled to face the towering black-garbed lankiness of Kyler Garriott.

"It's been a long time comin', little brother," Kyler said. "But here it is, boy. I'll give you a head start, Clem, so make your bid."

Clem made a frenzied grab for his gun, his hand stiff and jerking despite his effort to keep it smooth. Kyler's clawed left hand streaked with the speed of light, and Clem knew he was too late, Kyler was taking him *left-handed,* and that fleeting fact bothered Clem more than anything else. A roaring explosion leaped at Clem, and a clublike impact smashed the middle of his body, bending and driving him back on the slats, still on his feet. Clem yanked his Colt clear of the leather but another blast caught him, rocking him backward until he brought up against an empty hitch-rack.

Swaying on the rail, Clem strained to lift his gun into line, but it was too heavy, there was no strength left in the shattered numbness of his stocky body. The gun went off, splintering the board walk at his feet, and Clem pitched slowly forward onto all fours, the slugs heavy and searing inside him, blood streaming and spattering on the dusty wood.

There was another blinding blaze, a thunderclap of sound that burst the whole world open, and Clem rolled loosely onto his side, squirmed spasmodically onto his riddled belly, and lay there in a dark spreading pool, the sunshine touching his brown head with a glimmer of golden fire.

"Self defense, boys," Kyler said, to the men who had erupted from the Longhorn and other saloons and stores. "Clem reached first. He said he was comin' after me with a gun."

"A fair break, more than even," Laidlaw declared. "Kyler gave the kid a good start."

"Clem was proddin' us first," Hamrick said, "and then he went after Kyler."

"Where's Sheriff Rubeling?" asked Kyler.

"Outa town," somebody said. "And if I was you, I'd get outa town before Ash Cordell gets here!"

"Come on, boys," Kyler said, gesturing impatiently. "They know where to find us. Cordell or anybody else that wants us."

Koney stood in front of his Longhorn Saloon, rubbing his bald head and watching Kyler walk away with Red Hamrick and Pretty Boy Laidlaw. He looked back to where the shocked men were shuffling about the dead body of Clem.

"I wouldn't want to be them," Koney said, pointing after the three Hatchet men. "Kyler Garriott's as good as dead right now, boys. As dead as young Clem here, when Ash gets word of this."

"Clem wasn't no gun-fighter," mumbled old Pruett, the saddlemaker. "Never saw the boy wearin' a gun before today."

"Where the hell are them deputies of Rubeling's?" asked another.

"They won't show until Hatchet's out of town," Koney said sourly. "You can bet your bottom dollar on that."

"That Clem was as nice a boy as ever lived," muttered old Pruett. "Them Garriott buzzards, they sure get away with anythin', up to and includin' murder. This was murder, pure and simple. Young Clem never had a chance."

"They've gone too far this time," Koney said grimly. "Maybe the law won't get them, but Ash sure as hell will!"

"This has been brewin' for years," Pruett said. "And this is just the beginnin'. There'll be a war now that'll tear the Carikaree from end to end."

"Here comes them deputies, Paynter and Shokes," announced a voice.

"Yeah, right on schedule," said Koney with dry bitterness. "All them boys ever do is pick up the dead."

VI

WHEN Ash Cordell and Tannehill left Hillhouse that afternoon, they turned left out Western Avenue, clattered across the North Bridge over the Carikaree River, and followed the road in its northeasterly course along the Bittersweet. Their destination was the Double-D on Wagon Mound, but they had made no mention of the fact that they might be gone for three or four days.

Ash didn't want to encourage Sue Ellen to see Gene Garriott again, or to let Clem know he had ample time to spend with Nita.

Having started late, they spent that night in Chimney Rocks, a small ranching and farming community sheltered by a fantastic cluster of stone pillars and columns, from which the settlement derived its name. There were no Hatchet riders in town, but they learned that little Squeak Eakins and big Moose Blodwen had been there recently and gone on toward Wagon Mound. A few weeks previous Talboom had passed through with a Hatchet crew, bound for the same plateau. The Garriott men were keeping close tabs on some Wagon Mound outfit, but no open hostiliites had been reported as yet.

Ash and Tan got an early start before daybreak in the morning, and were pushing toward the great tableland when the sun rose flaming from the Big Barrancas, far to the east. Ash Cordell was worried about the Delsing family ahead of them, and his own brother and sister back in Cadmus. He wished the two families were together in one spot; it would be a lot easier to watch over and protect them. . . Tannehill sang mournful cowboy dirges as they rode:

"Far away from his dear old Texas,
We laid him down to rest;
With his saddle for a pillow,
And his gun across his breast."

"You sure sing cheerful numbers, Tan," grumbled Cordell.

"Glad you like 'em, Cord," grinned Tannehill, and went on crooning in a low sad voice.

Leaving the Bittersweet for a cutoff, they crossed an arid section of sun-scorched rock and sand, creosote brush, catclaw and mesquite groves. Here and there blossomed clusters of spiny-wanded ocitollo and the spreading candelebra of saguaro cactus, thickets of mescal and bunches of cholla, stands of Spanish bayonet and bladed yucca. Emerging from this semi-desert of alkali flats and sandy dunes, they climbed to the vast broken surface of Wagon Mound in the furnace heat of afternoon, the riders sweat-soaked in the burning leather, their horses lather-frothed and wind-blown.

"This may be a shortcut," drawled Tannehill, "but it sure cramps my singin' style, all this heat and dust."

"We'll come back on the Creek Road," comforted Cordell, "so you can sing all the way, Tanny."

"That'll be fine, Cord. The miles are nothin' and time ceases to exist, when I am in good voice."

Along toward mid-afternoon, on Delsing land now, the flatted sound of windtorn gunshots echoed from the walls of Scalplock Canyon before them. Slanting steeply up to the rimrock, their trained eyes quickly took in the situation. In the center of the open canyon floor, two riders were pinned down behind their dead horses, with two hidden riflemen sniping away at them from tumbled boulders on the rocky wall. Ash Cordell got out his field-glasses and trained them on the pair that had been bushwhacked. As he had expected and feared, it was Dan Delsing and his son Fritz. He couldn't see enough of the sharpshooters above to identify them, but it was a safe bet they were Hatchet riders.

Cordell handed the binoculars to Tannehill.

"I got a glimpse of a fat carcass up there that must belong to Blodwen," said Tannehill. "Which most likely means that his pardner is that withered-up little rat Eakins."

"That's what I figured, Tan. We'd better swing around and come up on the rim behind them."

They circled widely and climbed outer slopes of talus rock, the horses ploughing strongly up drifts of gravel and shale, laboring steadily upward toward the outside rim. The grade was less precipitous than that of the inner wall, and they made good time on the blue roan and the mottled buckskin. Their estimate of angles and distances quite accurate, they reached the summit at a point almost directly above and behind the two riflemen from Hatchet. Ground-tying their sweat-rimed mounts back in a clump of scrub cedar, they moved forward with their carbines and started working their way down the steep inside slope toward the enemy position.

It was slow painful going, with occasional dislodged pebbles threatening to start miniature avalanches that would give them away. The Hatchet rifles were hammering away with monotonous regularity to keep the Delsings nailed securely down on the canyon bottom. Now and then Dan

or Fritz were able to fire back from their low barrier of horseflesh.

THE ambushers had moved down, since Cordell and Tannehill first sighted them afar, and were now about midway of the wall. Intervening brush and boulders obscured them, except for the smoke from their muzzles, but the two men above caught momentary glances of the Hatchet horses. Lowering themselves cautiously from handholds to footholds, utilizing all available cover and striving for silence, Cordell and Tannehill crept slowly down upon the enemy sharpshooters.

Then a tiny pebble slithered loose, gathering others and gaining momentum on the way, until a small landslide of earth and rocks was surging and smoking down the craggy wall. A hoarse shout of alarm went up, and bullets began droning up the slope toward Cordell and Tannehill, screeching off stone surfaces and raking up showers of dirt. Cordell slid into the shelter of a boulder. Tannehill, caught in the open, took a great flying leap downhill, lighting in a gravel drift with the dust billowing around him.

The massive bulk of Moose Blodwen came into view, as the corpulent giant stood upright to line his sights on Tannehill, but the limber whiplike Tannehill rolled over and fired his carbine one-handed like a revolver, before either Blodwen or Cordell could trigger. Blodwen grunted and lurched ponderously, his wild shot crackling harmlessly through the brush, and Cordell squeezed off with that huge bulk hung firmly on his front sight. The carbine slammed his shoulder, the high-powered report spanging clearly, and Moose Brodwen heaved over backward, thrashed for a few seconds in the brush, and was still. Tan and Ash both had bullets in him.

Little Squeak Eakins, a flitting warped form with tobacco swelling his wizened cheek, made a frenzied break for his horse, vaulted into the saddle, and went bucketing down a long shaly wash toward the canyon floor, the dust geysering high behind him. Tannehill and Cordell were on their feet, firing as fast as they could trigger and lever, but Eakins and his mount both seemed unhittable or impervious to lead.

Their carbines emptied, Cordell and Tannehill looked at each other in disgust, but the Delsings, father and son, were opening up on the Hatchet rider as he plunged wildly nearer the bottom of the gravel drift. The horse went down, cartwheeling in a storm of dirt at the foot of the talus slope, flinging the small gunman clear with stunning force. Somehow Squeak Eakins clambered upright and staggered toward cover, but Dan and Fritz Delsing had him bracketed, dropping him before Eakins had taken three stumbling steps.

After making sure Blodwen was dead, Cordell waited with the giant's horse while Tannehill climbed the wall after their own mounts. Twisting up and lighting a cigarette, Cordell watched the Delsings remove their saddles and gear from the dead ponies and walk toward the bottom of the wall where Eakins had fallen. Tannehill returned, leading the sure-footed geldings, and they mounted up to ride wallowing down the sheer wash, Cordell trailing Blodwen's big brute behind him.

On the floor of the canyon, they dismounted and shook hands all around, the men grave and sober, but young Fritz elated and jubilant over his first battle.

"You boys pried us out of a mighty bad hole," Dan Delsing said, his square-jawed face solemn and powder-grimed. "They had us so we could hardly move a finger."

"You've been expectin' this, Dan?" asked Cordell.

Dan nodded his graying head. "They've been hangin' around watchin' us, ever since you and Tan pulled out. Talboom was in awhile back, with some Hatchet hides he claimed was found buried in my land. An old Garriott trick, of course. I knew then they'd be shootin' at us before long." He spat and smiled faintly. "Well, they couldn't have picked a better day for it."

"I knew it was you and Tan, Cord," said Fritz Delsing. "I told Dad so, the minute we saw you up on the rim. Couldn't recognize you that far off, but I could feel it was you two."

"Anywhere there's powder burnin', you're apt to find us, Fritz," grinned Tannehill, drinking from his canteen and glancing at the bullet-torn body of Eakins. "You and your dad did some pretty fair shootin', son."

"We heard you had a little run-in at

Trelhaven," said Dan.

"There's goin' to be a lot of 'em from here on," Cordell said. "I just wish you folks weren't mixed up in it."

"Can't be helped, Cord," said Dan Delsing. "I wouldn't mind, if it wasn't for the family. Those Garriotts have got to be wiped out sometime, if the Carikaree's ever goin' to be a fit place to live in."

"You're goin' to stay, aren't you, Cord?" the boy said, turning his tow-head anxiously. "We had some riders, but they all got scared and hightailed off when they found out Hatchet was on us."

"Sure, Fritz, we'll be around," Cordell said. "Although there's a few things in Cadmus I may have to take care of, too."

"Let's get along home, boys," suggested Dan. "Fritz and I can ride this big black, if you boys can pack our gear."

Cordell and Tannehill lashed the extra saddles and equipment onto their horses and stepped into the leather, with Fritz riding behind his father on the black that had belonged to Blodwen. They had thrown Eakins' body out of sight in the brush. Cordell would have liked to bury both men and the dead Hatchet horse, but they didn't have the tools or the time.

"It'll be quite a few days, maybe a week or more, with luck," Cordell said thoughtfully, "before Hatchet finds out what happened to those two. By that time we should be able to get Rubeling out here with a posse. I think Tan and I better go back in tomorrow and start workin' on Rube."

"He said he'd throw in, if anybody hit the Delsings," remarked Tannehill.

Dan nodded. "Rube and I was always pretty good friends."

"How's Mrs. Delsing and Laura, Dan?" inquired Cordell.

"Some upset naturally, but fine otherwise. They'll sure be glad to see you two boys ridin' in."

"We aren't exactly sorry to hit the Double-D again," drawled Tannehill. "It's beginnin' to be more like home than even the Hillhouse."

Dan Delsing slanted a questioning look, and Cordell inclined his head somberly. "Yes, my brother and sister grew up some while I was gone, Dan. Natural, of course, but I guess I thought they never would."

"It jolts a man some, to find his young ones grown up all of a sudden," agreed Dan with understanding. "Fallin' in love, thinkin' of gettin' married, and fightin' gun battles."

Young Fritz laughed, his blue eyes sparkling. "I'm glad I got the first one under my belt, Dad," he said. "I always wondered if I could stand up to it like a man."

"You did, son, you sure did," said his father. "But I hope you never have to do it again, boy. You could stand bein' shot at again, Fritz, but I don't know as I could stand seein' it."

THAT evening after supper, Laura Delsing and Ash Cordell walked out behind the tool-shed and sat down in the grass with their backs to the board wall, watching the stars brighten in the darkening blue sky, and the moon come out white and luminous. They had discussed about everything that had transpired in their separation, and Cordell was rather quiet and thoughtful now, brooding on Sue Ellen and Clem with a strange chilling premonition of disaster in him, a cold sinking nausea in the pit of his stomach.

"Poor Ash," the girl murmured. "You had to go back to Cadmus, after all. And now this war is coming up. Everything's conspiring to keep you from doing what you want to do."

"It isn't that, Laura. I don't know what it is. I guess I'll never get to find that valley, and maybe it's just as well. I think we'd better get married this fall—after this trouble is over."

"Yes, Ash, that's what I want. If we're both still here, in the fall . . ."

"We'll be here, Laura."

"I don't know, Ash. There's an awful feeling inside me. Shouldn't we get married now, before it starts?"

"No, that wouldn't be right. And there isn't time, Laura."

"It would be better than—nothing."

"Don't talk that way, Laura," he said. "We're goin' to have everything, all the rest of our life together."

THE following afternoon Cordell and Tannehill were standing at the bar in the Lucky Seven Saloon when a dust-covered rider came in and started talking about some shooting in Cadmus Flats. Customers and

idlers clustered eagerly about him for details. Cordell was paying little attention until he saw a look of disbelief and then horror on Tannehill's lean leathery face. A terrible fear filled Cordell as he wheeled away from the bar, and some of the men were already shushing the speaker with words and motions.

"What was that you were sayin'?" asked Cordell clearly, walking toward the group, the men shrinking back before him.

"Gawd Almighty!" groaned the dusty messenger. "I didn't see you, Cord. I don't like to bring you this kinda news, Cord."

"Who was killed?" Cordell demanded relentlessly, knowing the answer even as he asked the question.

"Cord, I'm sorry . . . Your brother Clem. Day before yesterday."

Cordell's fingers were biting deep into the man's arm. "You know that, for sure?"

He gulped and nodded, wilting in that steel grasp. "Kyler Garriott killed him out front of the Longhorn. Shot him three times."

"Where's Kyler?"

"He rode out with Hamrick and Laidlaw. Nobody's seen 'em since."

"What's Rubeling doin'?"

"Waitin' for you, Cord, I guess."

For the first time Cordell seemed to realize that he was gripping the man's arms with crushing, paralyzing force. "Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to—. And thanks for tellin' me." Cordell turned to Tannehill. "Come on, Tan, let's ride."

Tannehill threw money on the bar and said: "Give me a bottle to take along. I reckon we'll be needin' it." Carrying the bottle in his hand, Tannehill followed Cordell out through the batwings into the blinding glare of the street. Without a word they unwrapped their reins from the bleached worn rail, swung into the sun-warmed leather, and rode out the single street of Chimney Rocks toward the Carikaree and Cadmus.

THE office in the Big House at Hatchet was much as Cordell had remembered it, more like a luxurious library or drawing room than an office. Gurney Garriott enjoyed rich living and opulent surroundings. Cordell and Tannehill, feeling undressed without their gun-belts, paced the large, high-ceilinged room while awaiting old Gurney. Outside, Sheriff Rubeling and his deputies were making a token search for Kyler, although Rube felt certain Gurney was telling the truth when he said Kyler was not on the ranch. Old Gurney had not welcomed the intrusion of the law, and his look at Rubeling indicated that Rube would never see another term in office.

"How long since has it been murder in this country, when two men stand up and shoot it out?" demanded Gurney, adding: "In broad daylight, on the main street of a town."

"I'm not makin' any official charge yet, Gurney," said Rubeling. "I'd just like to talk with Kyler."

"So would I!" snapped Gurney. "But damned if I know where he's at."

This was the first real opportunity Cordell had been given to inspect the headquarters of Gurney Garriott, and he was making the most of it. The hardwood floor was covered with thick carpets, soft under their boots, and the paneled walls were lined with bookshelves, hung with oil paintings and portraits, fitted with full-length mirrors.

A great flat-topped oak desk gleamed with a dull rich luster, and behind it were filing cases and a tall carved cabinet filled with glittering bottles of expensive liquor. There were racks of rifles and revolvers, a broad fieldstone fireplace, leather easy chairs and couches. Crystal chandeliers were suspended in shimmering brilliance from the lofty paneled ceiling. Cordell and Tannehill felt rather uneasy in such an elegant setting.

Ash was scanning the family portraits when old Gurney returned. The subject of one had obviously been Gurney's father, regal and overbearing, proud, rock-jawed and aquiline-nosed. The man in the next frame resembled someone Cordell had known or seen, and then he realized with a shock that the remembered likeness was what he saw on the rare occasions when he studied himself in a mirror. It gave him an eerie, awed feeling to discover his own resemblance on the wall of this Garriott chamber.

"Who was that, Gurney?" he asked, pointing out the portrait.

"An uncle, my father's brother," Gurney said, looking from the picture to Cordell and back again. "That's strange, Ash. You look a little like that uncle of mine as you grow older."

"Black sheep, I suppose?" Cordell murmured.

"Well, not exactly. He had his good points as well as bad." Gurney settled ponderously behind the desk and motioned them into chairs before it. "I've been expecting you, Ash," he said, sighing. "Didn't expect a sheriff's posse, but that's all right. I was sorry to hear what happened in town, Ash. Sorrier than I can put into words. It was almost like one brother killing another. I don't know, Ash . . ." He made a weary gesture. "I tried to do the best I could for all of you. But you always hated us, Ash. I thought Clem was different, but perhaps he hated us, too."

"Why did you take us in that way?"

Gurney mulled that over a moment. "I saw a chance to do something good and decent. My motives were partly selfish, I'll admit. I knew how people were talking about Hatchet. I thought a kind generous act might make them see us in a better light. Wrong, of course, I was just heaping coals of fire on my own head, as it turned out. But I meant well, Ash. I meant well by you children."

"You did all right by us, Gurney," said Cordell. "But I still feel that you know something about our folks, and how they happened to be killed up there in the mountains."

"Nothing whatever, Ash, I've told you a hundred times."

GARRIOTT was a giant of a man, going slowly overweight and fat, but with an iron hardness underlying the massive flesh. His character was evident in the bold heavy thrust of the jaws, the large arrogant Roman nose and piercing black eyes.

"You don't know where Kyler's gone?" Cordell asked flatly.

"I haven't the slightest idea, Ash."

"Where's Gene?"

"I don't know that either. But Gene had nothing to do with it. Gene's a good boy, without any of the bad streak that's in Kyler and in you, Ash."

"I'll find Kyler," said Cordell.

"You won't rest until Kyler's dead—or you are dead?"

"That's right, Gurney. That's the way it is now."

Old Gurney Garriott shook his head. "It was a fair fight, Ash. You've killed men over nothing more important than a dance hall girl. You killed Thorner over that same girl in Trelhaven."

"That was different," Cordell said. "This was plain murder. Kyler's always been a gunman and killer. Clem never used a gun in his life."

"He was wearing one."

"Sure, Kyler prodded him into that."

Gurney sighed heavily. "I can see that you're set, Ash. Nothing will change you or stop you but a bullet."

Ash Cordell nodded, the bones of his cheeks and jaws standing out sharper than ever under the bronzed skin, his wide mouth thinned straight and hard, his gray eyes flaring with green fire. "Are you plannin' to move against the Delsings on Wagon Mound?" he asked.

"Why no," Gurney said. "What makes you ask that, Ash?"

"Don't do it, Gurney," advised Cordell. "If you do, Hatchet will come right down on your head."

Garriott chortled deep in his throat. "I could have you killed right here. You know that, Ash."

"It wouldn't be very smart, Gurney. That's one murder you'd get charged with. You think Rubeling's your man, but he isn't any more. He's been some scared of you but he's gettin' over it. Rube thought a lot of Clem, and so did everybody else in Cadmus."

"You're the smart one, Ash. To come here with Rubeling, and without your guns. You don't want to die, do you, Ash?" Gurney was suavely taunting now.

Cordell smiled gravely. "There's a few things I'd like to do first."

"I won't set anyone on you, Ash. Unless it's to save Kyler."

"Nothin'll save Kyler."

"You aren't going after Gene too, are you, boy?"

"Not if he keeps away from my sister."

Gurney shook his noble gray head. "You're hard, Ash, hard and cold as steel. Too bad you never applied yourself to any-

thing worthwhile. You might have amounted to something, boy."

"Like you?" Cordell laughed in soft mockery. "No thanks, Gurney. Come on, Tan, we're wastin' our time here. Maybe we can get out of here this once without gettin' shot up."

"You won't be coming back, Ash." It was not a question.

"Not until I hear Kyler is hidin' out here."

"Do you think *you'd* hear it if he was?"

"I do, "Cordell said firmly. "There are men here who don't love you or your sons, Gurney."

"Get out!" Garriott roared suddenly, showing anger for the first time, sledging a huge fist down on the gleaming desktop. "Get out while you can!"

Cordell grinned. "Still got some of that temper left, I see."

Outside in the yard dusk was settling, and Hatchet was at supper with a muted clatter and hum coming from the long dining hall and cookshack. The ranch was larger, more like a complete community than ever, with additional buildings and lamps glowing along the company streets. Hatchet housed an army of riders, thought Cordell, and it would take another army to wipe the place out. Waiting out near the gate, Rubeling and his three deputies looked small and pathetic.

VII

A LONE rider with enormous broad shoulders and a strangely squat body sat waiting in the saddle where their horses were tethered. This man's face was wide and grotesquely ugly like his bulk, Cordell observed as they walked closer to the hitch-rail, the features conveying the same impression of deformity that the powerful hunched body did. It was a froglike face with dark mottled skin, full and fleshy with a thick flattened nose. Wide down-turned lips bulged over protruding teeth, and the hooded eyes shone like an animal's in the gloomy light.

The creature was silent while they mounted. Cordell felt his scalp crawl under his hat, and cold stirred icily in the pits of his stomach.

"I'm Hodkey," the man said, in a deep rough voice. "Just a mite curious is all. Cordell, you'd look a whole lot better with a gun-belt on."

"I'll wear it for you next time," promised Ash easily.

Hodkey made a weird chuckling sound in his throat. "Right obligin' of you, sonny. I reckon you boys know who I am?"

"You said your name was Hodkey," drawled Tannehill.

Hodkey looked straight at Tannehill. "That don't mean nothin' to you, huh?" He laughed, a gibbering and hideous sound in the dusk. "Well, I just wanted a good look at you boys. I like to know my men, alive or dead, and no mistakes. I'll know you the next time." Hodkey saluted insolently, pulled his horse about, and cantered away.

"That character don't need a gun," Tannehill said, as they loped out toward the gate. "His face'll do the job."

"So that's Hodkey?" mused Ash. "The man everybody hears about and nobody ever sees. His brag is that he's killed more men than cholera and smallpox. I reckon we're next on his list, Tanny."

Hodkey meanwhile had pulled up in front of the doorway where Garriott was standing. "A mistake lettin' them go, Gurney."

"They were unarmed, Hod. They had the sheriff with them. What are you going to do?"

"Kill them," Hodkey said. "Kill the sheriff and his deputies too."

"Times are changing, Hod," said Gurney. "Public opinion's turning against us more than ever. Kyler made the mistake when he shot Clem Cordell."

"Who's goin' to hurt us?" demanded Hodkey. "We can sweep the Carikaree clean from the Barrancas to the Madrelinos, if we have to."

"It's a good thing I keep you out of this valley and up in the mountains, Hod," said Garriott with a wry smile. "Your ideas are out-dated."

Hoofs clopped through the growing darkness, and a column of riders filed in from the northwest, the body of them halting at one of the stables, a single horseman coming on toward the Big House. It was Talboom, high and lanky in the saddle, his knobby beaked face harsh with anger.

"We found Eakins and Blodwen, or what the vultures had left of 'em," Talboom reported. "In Scalplock Canyon on Wagon Mound. They downed two Double-D horses, but missed the men. Somebody came up and jumped Moose and Squeak from behind, it looked like. Anyway they're dead and picked pretty clean."

"What did you do about the Delsings, Tal?" asked Gurney.

"Not much. Waitin' on orders from you, Gurney. I gave them forty-eight hours to clear out but I doubt if they'll move."

"All right, we'll move them," Garriott said. "Hodkey, here's a chance to work off some of that bloodlust of yours. Pick a crew and ride for Wagon Mound tonight. You know what to do when you get there. Burn out Double-D, round up every head of stock on the place, and drive for the hills. Make it fast before any posse can get out from Cadmus."

"You think they'll send a posse after us?" Hodkey asked incredulously.

"They will this time. I told you times were changing in the Carikaree."

CORDELL and Tannehill, in the meantime, had joined Sheriff Rubeling's party of deputies Shokes, Maddern and Paynter, and they were heading westward along the river toward Blue Butte and Cadmus Flats. In response to Rubeling's first questioning look, Cordell had spread his palms emptily.

"I don't think Kyler's there," the sheriff said. "They've got a Hatchet hideout somewhere in the mountains. Hodkey stays there most of the time. Kyler probably lined out for that, along with Red and the Pretty Boy."

"That was Hodkey we met in there," drawled Tannehill. "Worth the trip."

"Hodkey!" cried Maddern. "Was that Hodkey? I thought there was somethin' familiar about that rider waitin' for you boys. I was in Abilene the day Hodkey killed three of them Possehls. I never saw anythin' like that Hodkey with the six-guns. One Possehl never got his iron out. The other two fired, but they was dead when their guns went off, one up in the air, the other almost blowin' his own foot off."

"Hodkey's face probably paralyzed them," Tannehill said.

"It's enough to paralyze a rattlesnake," said Maddern. "Hickok was town marshal of Abilene then, Wild Bill himself, but he never tried to take Hodkey."

"What you figure on doin', Ash?" inquired Rubeling.

"Hatchet's goin' to be ridin' against the Delsings," said Cordell. "We've got to get a posse out there, Rube, if we can raise one."

"We'll try, Ash, as soon as we get back tomorrow night. But there aren't too many men in Cadmus who want to buck the Garriotts out in the open. You know that as well as I do."

"I know, Rube. We'll just have to do the best we can."

"Maybe round up ten or a dozen," Rubeling predicted. "Nowhere near enough, but I wouldn't gamble on gettin' any more than that."

"We'll go along with what we can get," Cordell said.

"It's a sad state of affairs," Tannehill drawled, "when there's only ten or twelve men with any guts in a town as big as Cadmus Flats."

"Livin' in towns, gettin' married, and raisin' families, it does somethin' to men," said Rubeling, tall, brooding and hawklike on his spirited roan. "Maybe somethin'll wake 'em up sometime."

The next night they crossed the East Bridge over the Carikaree and rode in past the familiar lighted places of Front Street. Music was tinkling from the Rio Belle. Ash thought bitterly of Nita and Clem, dead and buried at twenty-five, before he had even started living.

Racking their horses in front of the Longhorn Saloon, the six riders shouldered through the slatted doors and lined up at the bar. Koney, setting out the bottle and glasses, paused before Cordell.

"Young fellah in here lookin' for you, Ash. Name of Bob Woodlee."

Cordell sighed deeply. "More trouble, I reckon."

"Why, I don't know, he didn't act hostile. Seemed right friendly, and all cut up when he heard about Clem. Wasn't he the Woodlee boy whose folks got killed up on the Bittersweet five-six years back?"

"That's him, Koney."

"Reckon he's waitin' up at the Hill-

house," said Koney. "Allowed he was real anxious to see you. Just in from Wagon Mound and had somethin' important to tell you and Tan."

"Thanks, Koney. We'll get along home and see him right away."

Cordell and Tannehill drank up, said good night to the sheriff, deputies and others, and departed. Rubeling followed them outside and promised to drum up a posse to ride in the morning. The other two mounted and swung along the street toward the Hillhouse Hotel, looming on its elevated bench at the west end. Leaving their horses with the hostler in the stable with instructions for a good rubdown and graining, Ash and Tan walked stiffly back to the kitchen entrance.

Ma Muller was sitting bowed over the table, her gray head on her arms, her shoulders tremulous with silent sobbing. Bob Woodlee sat opposite her, a glass of whiskey in his hand, a look of unhappiness on his plain, pleasant, brown face. Woodlee rose and shook hands with them, firm and hard without speaking.

Cordell laid his arm around the woman's hunched shoulders. "Come on, Ma. Aren't you even goin' to say hello? This is no good, Ma, you've got to cut it out." Ma Muller raised her tear-stained face slowly, looking up at Cordell with blurred stricken blue eyes, shaking her head in abject desolation. Clem's death had hit her hard, aging her years in the past few days, and now there was something else.

"Your sister's gone, Ash boy," she said, her voice strained and shaken. "Sue Ellen's gone! Gone without sayin' a word or leavin' a message or anythin'. That's not like Sue Ellen, not at all, Ash. Somebody must've taken her off. Maybe you were right about Gene Garriott, after all."

"Gene wouldn't hurt her, Ma," said Cordell, "or take her away if she wasn't willing to go. She must have gone of her own accord, Ma, and I suppose I drove her to it. The worst that'll happen to Sue Ellen is marryin' a Garriott, Ma, and I guess that's what she wants." Ash was sorely hurt and troubled by this news, but he could not reveal it when Ma needed cheering and comforting.

Ma Muller did derive some consolation from his words and his presence. "Perhaps you're right, Ash, they might have eloped. Anyway, I can't be mopin' around and carryin' on like this. Let me fix you boys somethin' nice to eat now."

They all protested that they had eaten, and insisted that she go to bed and try to get some sleep and rest. After Ma Muller had retired, Woodlee said:

"First, I've got to apologize for makin' a damn fool of myself in Trelhaven, boys. I've been ashamed ever since. You had that girl tagged right, and I was all wrong."

"Forget it, Woody," Cordell told him. "It's over and done with."

"I'd like to kill Nita Dell myself," Woodlee went on bitterly. "After hearin' what she did to Clem, I could blast her with pleasure!"

"What about Wagon Mound, Woody?"

"Hatchet riders found the two dead men in Scalplock Canyon, and gave the Delsings forty-eight hours to get out. I took Mrs. Delsing and Laura to Chimney Rock, but they wouldn't come any farther. Dan and the boy stayed on the ranch. Nothing could make them leave."

Ash swore softly. "We were takin' a posse up there tomorrow, Woody. But I reckon we'd better start tonight, if we can round up anybody at all. Or even if we can't . . ."

"Yes, the sooner the better," Woodlee said. "Hatchet may be on the march already."

"So we saddle up again," grinned Tannehill. "Seems like we been straddlin' leather ever since I can remember, night and day. Better pack all the grub we can, Cord. This is liable to be a long rough one."

"A good thing we didn't take our own horses to Hatchet," said Cordell. "Blue and Bucky are all rested up for us. Woody, you'll be needin' a fresh mount too. We've got a chestnut mare for you out back. I'll leave a note for Ma—and borrow some of her whiskey."

"I hope I catch up with Hamrick and Laidlaw somewhere along," Bob Woodlee said. "I know them two and Kyler Garriott were in that raid on our place on the Bittersweet, and I know Ash wants Kyler. Laidlaw, just a kid like me then, tied me to that wagon wheel, and Hamrick cut me to pieces with a bullwhip. Never told anybody this before."

Cordell anad Tannehill nodded solemnly. They had seen the wicked scars that striped Woodlee's back, from his neck to the base of his spine.

AT THE start there had been great interest and excitement in Cadmus, and it looked as if they were going to have a large posse riding that night. Until Rubeling said. "It may mean ridin' against Hatchet, you men might as well know it now." That cooled down most of the loafers, and sobered off most of the drunks.

It also caused little Koney to shuck off his apron in the Longhorn, buckle on his gun, and start for the Riverside Corral after his horse. And it brought old Pruett, the saddle-maker, out of his shop carrying an old Sharps .50, and calling on Koney to fetch back his horse too.

There were others who really wanted to go, but were held back by various reasons, domestic, business and professional, or general unpreparedness. These pledged to follow up with another posse.

There were only ten riders in the group that left the Flats at 1:08 that summer morning, clomping across North Bridge and heading up the Creek Road alongside of the Bittersweet. Ash Cordell, Tannehill adn Bob Woodlee. Sheriff Rubeling with four deputies, Maddern, Shokes, Paynter and Chesbro. The small sour-faced balding Koney, and the ancient gray-mustached Pruett. They weren't nearly strong enough for a head-on showdown fight, for there was certain to be a score or more of Garriott hands on the Wagon Mound expedition. But they might be in time to save Dan Delsing and his son Fritz.

They reached Chimney Rocks not long after sun-up, and learned with dismay that Mrs. Delsing and Laura had ridden back to the Double-D. A man came out of the Lucky Seven Saloon, the man who had brought the news of Clem's death to the Rocks that day, introducing himself as Andruss, Andy for short, and saying he'd like to join them. He was made welcome and the column moved north.

They pushed on as fast as possible, without punishing their mounts too severely in the fierce heat, but to Ash Cordell the pace seemed agonizingly and maddeningly slow. It was agreed to follow Bittersweet Creek all the way this trip, to spare horses and riders the sun-blasted desert crossing of the shortcut. Wagon Mound was looming close in the afternoon glare, when the crackle of distant gunfire came to them. Cordell groaned aloud, "Too late, too late," and others cursed or prayed silently, according to their nature, wagging sun-dazed heads and gnawing parched lips.

"I'm goin' on ahead, Rube," said Cordell.

"Don't do anythin' rash now," Rubeling warned. "Don't charge the whole Hatchet outfit, Ash. Throwin' your own life away won't help the Delsings or anybody else."

Cordell lifted his blue roan out in front of the posse. Tannehill and Woodlee promptly put their horses after him, and the trio soon left the main force behind. The firing rolled up louder and steadier, as they climbed to the surface of Wagon Mound, until it soudned like a full-scale battle on the interior. Driving on along the high bank of the Bittersweet, they checked their weapons as they rode, all three of them having strapped on double-holstered belts and extra guns for this campaign.

"Two men against twenty or thirty," moaned Cordell. "Dan and the kid are doin' well to hold out this long. I hope it started before Mom and Laura could get back there."

The sounds of battle rose and fell on the molten air, rumbling and muttering like a distant summer thunderstorm. The banks of the creek were lower as they progressed into the plateau, and far ahead they could see the faint line of the irrigation ditch that diverged eastward toward the Double-D. After a walking rest, they threw the horses into a run, the riflefire swelling in volume and intensity, and Cordell felt like screaming out in rage against the time and space elements that left them so helpless. The racketing guns were dying out as they neared the ditch, and then Cordell saw two horses in a clump of cottonwoods, empty-saddled, two feminine figures huddled nearby on the shady ground.

For a horrible moment he thought they were lifeless, and then he saw Laura moving, apparently trying to soothe and comfort her mother. Kicking the slate-colored gelding into a gallop, Cordell raced toward those trees, Tan and Woody pounding after

him. The firing had ceased entirely by the time they drew up under the cottonwoods and flung themselevs from the leather. That meant it was all over at the ranch; Dan and Fritz were dead or dying. Almost immediately smoke started billowing up gray-black into the sunlight above the Double-D. The three men tried to screen the sight from Laura and her mother.

The Delsing women were unhurt, although Mom was nearly in a state of collapse from grief and despair. Laura's fine carved features were shining with sweat, streaked with powder and dirt, as she lifted her bright chestnut head.

"They drove us away, Ash," she said hollowly. "We couldn't get anywhere near the place. They started shooting at us, but I don't think they tried to hit us. There must be thirty or more of them."

"The shooting's stopped!" Mrs. Delsing cried, jerking up from her reclining position. "And look! The place is burning! Dear God in Heaven . . ." She broke off sobbing.

"You stay here, Laura," said Cordell. "We'll go along and see."

"No!" Mrs. Delsing was scrambling to her feet. "We're going with you. It's our men in there!"

"Better stay back," Cordell said gently, swinging aboard his blue roan, Tannehill and Woodlee following suit. Wheeling out of the trees, they hurtled toward the irrigation ditch and the smokeclouds towering beyond that hill shoulder. Glancing back once, Cordell saw that the Delsing women had mounted and were coming after them.

VIII

CLEARING the sloping flank of the hill at last, they came in sight of the burning ranch buildings. Hatchet had pulled out, its murderous task accomplished, a saffron haze in the east marking the course of retreat. Every structure on Double-D had been oil-soaked and fired, flaring up hot and bright, the smoke columns rising dense and high, merging overhead to darken the sunlit sky. The smell of the smoke made Cordell sick with old cruel memories, and Bob Woodlee's face paled and drew bone-tight under the tan.

Peering through slitted eyes they rode forward, taut dry lips snarling back on their teeth, rage and hate and a need for violence boiling up within them. The horses snorted and shied, as the heat reached out toward them in scorching, shimmering waves, the evil stench choking man and beast alike. There were dead horses on the plain but no human bodies visible, and no sign of life anywhere.

"In there, you reckon?" muttered Tannehill, nodding toward the blackening charred shell of the ranchhouse. Flame and smoke erupted from it in swirling pillars of gray, brown and black, laced with scarlet and gold. Piling up and spreading aloft, the billowing mass formed false thunderheads that shut out the sun.

Woodlee sniffed the air and shook his head. "Nobody in there, boys. I know the smell."

"Where the hell, then?" Tan's amber eyes probed the conflagration.

"There's Dan!" said Cordell, jumping down and dropping his reins, running with the stiff awkward grace of a rider toward the irrigation ditch, the other two vaulting clear and legging it after him.

Dan Delsing lay spread-eagled on the wall of the ditch, only his head and shoulders showing, his square powder-blackened face bowed across the carbine. As tenderly as possible, they hauled him up over the edge and laid him out on the bleached yellow grass. Delsing had been shot in the left shoulder and right leg, but not fatally nor even seriously, Cordell concluded. In both cases the slugs had gone right through. Dan opened his eyes, as Cordell bathed the wounds.

"Fritz?" he panted. "Out by—the corrals. He went down—out there. Dead, I guess . . . The boy's dead."

"Maybe not, Dan," said Cordell. "We'll see in a minute. You're goin' to be all right, Dan."

Delsing gestured weakly, as if to say that was irrelevant. Laura and her mother rode up and dismounted then, and Mrs. Delsing knelt quickly beside her husband. "I'll take care of Dan, Ash," she said. "You go find Fritz."

Cordell rose and looked at Laura. "Help your mother," he said. "We'll be right back."

They circled the blazing bonfires of the ranch yard and found young Fritz stretched

face down in the dirt by the corral rails, his straw-colored head bright in the sunshine. There was an old Walker Colt in his left hand, a Henry rifle in the right. He looked shot to pieces, his shirt and pants drenched with blood, but Fritz opened his glazed blue eyes when Cordell lifted and turned him over with gentle care.

"Dad—all right?"

"Sure, he's fine, Fritz."

The childish grimed face tried to smile. "Hell of a fight, Ash. Too bad—you missed it."

"We'll catch up with 'em," Cordell promised.

"We got—some of 'em," Fritz panted agonizingly. "But they was—too many."

"You sure gave 'em hell, you and Dan," said Cordell, trying to keep his voice from catching and breaking. "You'll do to take along, pardner."

Fritz Delsing smiled faintly, proudly, and started coughing. That brought a bright crimson gush from his boyish lips, and when it was over the blue eyes were sightless, the young life gone. Ash laid him easily back on the earth and stood up, blinking his eyes rapidly, looking at the somber faces of Rubeling and the rest of his men who had come up.

"Seventeen years old," Cordell said. "From here on every Garriott, every Hatchet man I see, is dead!"

"Dan isn't hit bad," Rubeling said, his hawk-face fierce and gaunt. "I'm sendin' Chesbro back to bring up a big posse. He'll have a wagon sent out from Chimney Rocks to pick up Dan and the women. We'd better keep on the trail."

"They won't be hard to follow," someone said. "They're drivin' all the stock they can pick up on the run."

"Dan say who was in the bunch, Rube?" asked Cordell.

"Hodkey and Talboom, for sure. And he thought he saw Kyler Garriott with Hamrick and Laidlaw."

"That's good," Cordell said.

"Looks like they headed back to Hatchet," said Tannehill. "Or all the way into the Big Barrancas."

Andruss, the Chimney Rocks' rider, spoke then, rather surprisingly: "No, boys. They've got a place up in the Shellerdines, where they hold their rustled cattle. They'll hit for there, I reckon."

"You know where it is, Andruss?" asked Rubeling.

"Not exactly, but I got a notion," Andruss said. "They'll lead us to it anyhow."

"Well, let's roll," Rubeling said. "Hate to leave the Delsings, but there's nothin' we can do here."

"Tan and I better stay a little while," Ash said, looking down at the dead boy beside the corral. "We'll catch up in a couple of hours, Rube."

"Sure, you do that, Ash," said the sheriff. "We'll be seein' you."

The posse went on eastward across Wagon Mound toward the Spires, on the trail of the Hatchet raiders and their stolen herd. Cordell and Tannehill turned back to the fiery wreckage of the Double-D, where the flames chewed briskly and the smoke mushroomed high, black and evil in the sunny afternoon. Cottonwoods were exploding in the heat.

Laura and Mom Delsing were sitting beside the wounded Dan, gazing at the smouldering destruction of their home.

"I knew the boy was dead," Dan Delsing said. "I wouldn't have hit for the ditch if I hadn't seen Fritz go down. We dropped four-five of them, Ash, they must've lugged 'em off. Quite a kid, that Fritz. I couldn't ask for a better man to side me. Mom, Laura, don't cry so, girls. It was meant to be, we've got to figure it that way. We'll bury him right here, because we'll be buildin' here again, and we want him with us.

"I've got a feelin'," Dan went on, "Double-D's goin' to be here, long after the Garriotts have gone under."

They buried Fritz on the slope over the smoke-shrouded ranch site, Cordell and Tannehill digging the grave deep, filling it and securing it with stones piled as markers. Leaving a bottle of Ma Muller's whiskey with Dan Delsing, they mounted and went east in the waning afternoon.

CORDELL and Tannehill overtook the posse before nightfall near the eastern perimeter of Wagon Mound, and they made a cold camp within view of the Hatchet fires on the prairie between the plateau and the spires. The Garriott forces, driving a few hundred head of cattle, left a plain trail

to follow, and the sheriff's party had to slow down to stay behind them. Hatchet, over-confident in its power, and disdainful of any possible pursuit, could have been overhauled and taken, had Rubeling's been a larger company. But ten riders were not enough to throw against thirty or more.

The following day, as Andruss had predicted, the rustlers turned north from the Spires and headed into the foothills of the Shellerdine Mountains. Somewhere in the highlands, according to Andruss, they had a hidden valley, presided over by Hodkey, where stolen herds were pastured until Hatchet altered the brands and fleshmarks and disposed of them. Cordell began to wonder if this Garriott hideout and his long-sought Cathedral Valley could be one and the same. He and Tan had combed the Shellerdines, but a lifetime wasn't long enough to cover the entire mountain wilderness. They could easily have missed it in their earlier explorations.

Excitement gripped Cordell, as they mounted higher into the range that third day, and he saw landscapes that were like something dimly remembered from a dream, scenes that were vaguely but hauntingly familiar, places he was certain he had looked upon in some previous life. This had happened before in his wide roving excursions, but never had it impressed him so deeply. At various levels, they came upon holding grounds where cattle had been grazed and bedded over a period of years, which substantiated Andruss's story.

"Funny we never hit these cow trails and bed grounds up here, Tan," mused Cordell.

"Seems odd now," Tannehill said. "But the Shellerdines are mighty big, Cord, and they run for hundreds of miles."

Progress the fourth day was painfully slow on the mountainside, but even then Chesbro and his reinforcements from Cadmus did not come up. Of all the trailworn and nerve-fretted riders, Cordell was the most impatient and overwrought, sensing something portentous ahead.

"We're close now, Cord," remarked Andruss, pulling up beside him on the steep rocky trail. "I got a feelin' we're comin' close."

Cordell nodded. "I can feel it, too."

The sun was sinking in a western sea of flames over the distant Madrelinos, when the trail narrowed into an even steeper rock-sided passage. After halting for a discussion, they left the trail and swung off to the left, climbing in a wide circle through a thinly wooded park of ash and laurel. Emerging finally on the rimrock, they dismounted and stared out over a long, narrow, crescent-shaped valley, with a stream curling along it like a slender ribbon of silver, and cattle grazing along the low flat banks.

Tannehill and Woodlee exchanged significant glances, and turned to Cordell. Ash was standing like a man turned to stone, only his gray eyes alive and shining, brimming with awe and wonder, as if at the sight of some fabulous and incredible vision. At the far north end of the crescent stood a great lofty butte, spired, pinnacled and arched like a vast cathedral of solid rock.

The setting sun splashed its massive bulk with magnificent colors and shades, crimson and gold, blue and gray, purple and lavender, in all variations and blends. His eyes fixed on that stark grandeur, Ash Cordell was like a man standing before a shrine after a long weary pilgrimage.

The base of the butte was shrouded with white mist from a waterfall. There could be no mistake this time. After all these years, Ash Cordell had come back at last to the valley of his childhood. Tannehill and Woodlee needed no words to confirm their first impression. A glance at Cordell's face was enough.

Near the center of the valley, about where the Cordell cabin had been, stood a large square blockhouse built of logs, surrounded by smaller shacks, sheds and corrals. The presence of sixty or seventy horses, indicated a formidable force in this mountain stronghold, and there must have been several thousand head of cattle.

"You'll find every brand in the whole Carikaree down there," said old Pruett, tugging at his gray mustache.

Men with field-glasses were trying to identify the Hatchet hands moving about the expansive layout, and Cordell joined them in the effort. But even with binoculars it was difficult in the fading light, at that long range, although a few observers declared they had glimpsed Hodkey and Talboom, and others thought they had made

out Kyler Garriott with his bodyguards, Red Hamrick and Pretty Boy Laidlaw.

"The two I want," whispered Bob Woodlee. "Those last two."

"You don't want to be hoggish, Woody," drawled Tannehill. "Give me one of 'em, won't you?"

Withdrawing to a spot well below the canyon rim, the posse made camp and warmed up a supper from their scant dwindling rations. Afterward a council of war was held about the low-burning fire. There was nothing to do until Chesbro arrived with his rearguard, but they should be along by tomorrow, at the latest. As Rubeling remarked:

"A sheriff's badge ain't goin' to mean a thing up here. We've got to have the manpower to back it up, that's all, boys."

There was no argument against this obvious truth, but Cordell said: "I'd like to drop down there tonight and scout around a little, Rube. Maybe find out who's there, and how many of 'em."

"It's pretty risky, Ash, and you might give us away," Rubeling protested. "You're just hungry to get at Kyler and the rest of them."

"I won't take any chances, Rube, and I won't start anythin'," Cordell persisted quietly. "I've got reasons of my own for wantin' to go."

"Could a man ask what they are, Ash? You're no way obliged to tell, of course."

"No harm in tellin'—now. This is the valley we lived in when I was a kid. The valley my folks were murdered in, Rube. I've been lookin' for it all my life."

"Hellfire and damnation!" Rubeling said softly. "Then you've been right about the Garriotts all along, Ash."

"Looks like it," Cordell said quietly. "Good enough for me anyway, Rube."

"Well, go ahead, Ash," said the sheriff. "Just be careful, that's all. We're goin' to need you and your guns plenty, Ash."

"Reckon I better drift along with you, Cord," drawled Tannehill. "Kinda keep you out of trouble down there."

"Not this time, Tan," Cordell told him. "This one's better alone. I will take a chew off that plug of yours though."

Ash bit off a chew, pulled on his buckskin jacket against the night cold of the mountains, gave a casual salute, and walked out of the ruddy firelight up toward the rim overlooking the valley.

IX

AFTER leaving the steep cliff and the talus slopes, it was easy going in the blunt wooded hillocks that rolled in gentle descent to the bottomland. Moving in the shadow of laurels and ash, pine and poplars, Cordell came close to the point where he and Sue Ellen and Clement had fled to rest and witness the burning of the cabin. Crouching there and watching the blockhouse, Cordell felt as if he were on hallowed ground that had fallen into enemy hands.

Hatchet men were sitting and lying about outside campfires. Some of their faces were clearly discernible in the wavering firelight, but he recognized none of the leaders he was seeking. There were about sixty in the camp, he estimated, perhaps more with the ones that were already sleeping. In the loghouse men were playing cards by lamplight, and he scanned their faces and forms through the broad window, with no better results. Neither Kyler nor Gene Garriott was in sight, and he failed to see anything of Laidlaw and Hamrick, Talboom and Hodkey.

The presence of Hatchet in Cathedral Valley indicated beyond any reasonable doubt that the Garriotts had been responsible for the murder of his mother and father. The fact that they had converted the valley into a holding ground for rustled cattle was sufficient evidence. The motivation behind the crime was a mystery that Cordell meant to solve. There was some link between the Cordells and the Garriotts, which had caused Gurney to offer them shelter on Hatchet. Ash recalled the portrait of Gurney's uncle, to whom he bore a marked resemblance. A blood relationship there somewhere, without a doubt.

He was about to withdraw when a hoarse voice bawled out: "Where's that damn Hodkey? He owes me ten dollars!"

There was laughter, and Cordell barely caught the words: ". . . Down by the Falls."

Cordell dropped back into the brush and trees, skirting the blockhouse widely and hiking toward the waterfall at the north end of the crescent-shaped trough. Cathedral

Butte was a towering mass of mist-wreathed silver in the moonlight, as he walked toward it.

If he could catch Hodkey by surprise, Cordell would make him talk. Hodkey had been Gurney's chief executioner for years. Hodkey must have been involved in the Cordell killings here, and he would know the story behind the deed.

Cordell kept to the shadowy edge of the grassland, warming his gun-handles with his palms and loosening the holstered .44's as he walked. An upward glance at the Big Dipper told him it was about ten o'clock.

A cloud blotted out the moon and became rimmed with white fire, as Cordell threaded his way across a cedar-grown ridge and stood surveying the broad barren ledge that overlooked the waterfall. He had come there as a child, with his mother and father and the other children, to stare in awed tremulous delight at the mighty two-hundred foot Falls. Somewhere in the dense fog that blanketed the stone shelf, Hodkey must be standing. Cordell crept carefully down the slope, a fine spray dampening his face, that steady endless roar in his ears.

The vapors swirled and interwove, then lifted momentarily, and Cordell caught a brief flash of a dark, misshapen bulk on that terrace, before the mists closed in again. There was no mistaking that wide squat ugliness, hunched with power and menace. Stepping forward, Cordell began to stalk Hodkey in the thick white fumes that rose and writhed, dipped and circled in an eerie fashion.

No sound could have been heard through the rush of water, but some uncanny animal instinct must have warned Hodkey of another's presence, for his shouting voice tore the haze: "Who's there? Is it you, Tal? Speak up, man! What is it?"

Something prompted Ash to answer, and he yelled back: "It's Cordell, and I'm wearin' my gun-belt for you, Hodkey!"

"What?" The involuntary word was followed by weird laughter. "Cordell, huh? So you saved me the trouble of runnin' you down, boy?"

"Keep talkin', Hodkey. Tell me about killin' my father and mother in this valley seventeen years ago. Tell me why Gurney wanted them dead!"

"You're ravin' crazy, son. I don't know what you're talkin about. Let's get outa this fog and settle this right, Cordell."

"What's the matter with this? We both got the same chance."

"But you got a gun in your hand, boy," accused Hodkey.

"Not me," Cordell replied. "I don't need any start, Hodkey. I'll take you from an even break."

"Good boy! We'll draw when the mist opens up, Cord."

"Fair enough." Cordell was straining his eyes, but the weaving gray veil was impenetrable. The minutes stretched on unbearably, and the blindness was maddening, intolerable.

A SUDDEN narrow rift cleared between them, a radiant lane of moonlight, and both men leaped into their draw, shifting as they threw their guns level. The muzzle blasts stabbed out instantaneously, almost meeting and merging between them, the explosions felt as much as heard in the torrential downpour of the cascade. Cordell sensed the searing closeness of a bullet, and knew they both had missed. The murk settled back around them before they could fire again. The interminable waiting and stalking went on in that dense damp pall.

But one thing stood out in Cordell's frozen mind. That instant of clarity had shown him Hodkey's monstrous form lurching sidewise, vivid as a figure caught in a flare of lightning, dragging one leg in an awkward crippling manner. And on that foot was a clumsy grotesque boot, with a thick built-up sole and heel . . . "So you're the cripple, Hodkey!" cried Cordell hoarsely. "I saw that boot the day you shot my father and mother!"

Hodkey came in an abrupt limping charge through the gloom, nearly catching Cordell unready, but Ash was springing aside when Hodkey's gun flared. As Hodkey lumbered past, Cordell slashed his gun barrel viciously across that huge evil head, beating the man down onto his hands and knees. Ash drove in to smash the steel barrel home again, but Hodkey was rolling and thrashing away on the stone surface. Fire speared up from him, and Cordell felt the scorching breath of another slug, as he let go again, the flame splitting the fog

in a downward slant, the lead screeching of rock.

The haze rolled around them, denser than ever, and the deadly game of hide-and-seek went on in the ghastly swirling grayness. Once more the mist thinned out with magic suddenness, and this time Cordell was a shade swifter, thumbing off a shot before Hodkey could line his gun. The impact turned Hodkey, jolting him back toward the outer edge of the shelf, his right shoulder sagging, the arm dangling limp and useless. His gun dropped from numbed fingers.

Hodkey reached left-handed for his other holster, but Cordell's Colt flamed again. Hodkey buckled and reeled from the shocking smash of the .44, sprawling backward and scrabbling feebly on the ledge, a squat and shattered hulk. The fog stayed away longer now, and the terrace glittered in the moonlight as Cordell walked forward, eyes sweeping from that crippled foot to the froglike face, with its squashed nose, shark's mouth, and hooded eyes. Hodkey was dying, sobbing out blood with every groaning breath, unable to stir the gun in his large left hand.

"You'll talk now," Cordell said, poised over him with gun barrel lifted to strike. "Tell me who my folks were. Why Garriott had them killed. Talk, Hodkey!"

"Talk, man?" gasped Hodkey. "I'm—dead!"

Cordell straightend with a sigh. Hodkey heaved into convulsive action, threshing and floundering toward the brink of the chasm. Ash jumped to restrain him, but the crippled gunman was gone with an insane gurgle of laughter, falling over the rocky rim and vanishing into the misty darkness. The thunderous fall of water obscured any sounds his body might have made on the rocks and shale hundreds of feet below.

Turning away from the cliff as the white clouds surged in once more, Ash Cordell tasted sweat and powdersmoke on his lips, and found that he was soaking wet and quivering all over from the prolonged stress and strain. Hodkey was dead and gone, but Ash had learned nothing outside the fact that Hodkey was the cripple who had killed, or supervised the killing of his mother and father. Well, that score was settled, at least. Getting rid of a murderer like Hodkey was a good night's work for any man.

There were still the three Garriotts left—Gurney and Kyler and Gene.

IN THE morning it seemed that at least half the Hatchet horses and men were gone. Apparently the crew that had participated in the raid on the Delsings, alarmed by Hodkey's disappearance, had moved out sometime during the night. Perhaps they had been able to see Hodkey's body at the bottom of the cliff. Anyway they were gone, and the remaining riders were gathering the cattle, getting ready to drive them toward the main pass at the southern tip of the crescent.

Deputy Chesbro arrived to report that his posse would be along in about an hour. He had brought a force of twenty-five men. He reported that the Delsings had reached Chimney Rocks safely, Dan was recovering well, and by this time they were probably in Cadmus Flats. But Chesbro knew nothing of the whereabouts of Gene Garriott and Sue Ellen Cordell. And he had no news of Kyler Garriott, Laidlaw and Hamrick. The Hatchet bunch that pulled out in the night must have taken another route because Chesbro's outfit had not seen them on the trail.

"They're gettin' set to move that herd out," Cordell said.

Rubeling nodded. "Ches, you drop back and bring up that posse as fast as you can. We'll be waitin' for you near the top of the pass. We've got men enough now to take what they got left here."

Chesbro started back down-mountain, and the rest of them finished saddling up and packing their gear in the cold-misted morning, gulping down scalding-hot coffee about the small campfire. Cordell shaped and lighted a cigarette, sauntering alongside the sheriff.

"A few of us ought to work the inside, Rube," he said. "I found a way we can get horses down, and I figured to take Tan and Woody with me. If they start drivin' before the posse gets up, we could maybe head 'em off or slow 'em up some."

"All right, Ash, you three boys do that," Rubeling agreed. "If you want more help, say the word."

"I think three's about right," Cordell

said. "Some of these horses wouldn't take to the way down I got in mind. I know what these three of ours can do."

"Good enough, Ash. We'll swing down around into the main trail."

"Get up to the head of it as soon as you can, Rube."

The Hatchet riders below were still rounding up cattle, when Cordell and his two companions reached the rimrock. Ash pointed out the precarious path down the cliffs, a narrow slanting shelf that switched back and forth across the rock face. It was slender and gradual at the top, widening and steepening as it descended.

"Not as bad as it looks," Cordell said. "We can ride that drift the last half of the way, right down into the timber."

Cordell led the way down the slim treacherous shelf, "Come on, Blue, come on, boy." Bob Woodlee followed next. Tannehill brought up the rear.

The ledge slanted first to the left, then to the right in a sharper but wider sweep, and back across the cliff to the left, ending abruptly above a perpendicular plane of naked rock. At this drop-off point, the shelf was wide and level, and Cordell waited there for the others. The early sun was crimsoning the eastern skyline above the Big Barrancas, and horses and men were already sweating. Woodlee looked up at craggy heights that reared above the timberline, and shook his head. "Some country—and you can have it," he murmured.

Below them, to the left of the vertical wall, was a shoft shaly drift of gravel and talus rock, fanning out down the cliff and into the treetops, that seemed almost directly beneath the riders. Cordell stroked his mount's slate-colored neck, and jumped the gelding out and down into the precipitous chute. The dust smoked up as they slid downward with the surging soil, the blue roan wallowing deep and plunging his hoofs to keep abreast of the small avalanche they created.

Woodlee grinned at Tannehill. "This may be fun, but I'll take mine in a nice cosy saloon somewhere." He had to use the spurs before the chestnut would take the leap, and Woodlee nearly went over her head when she landed, but the little mare straightened out and reared back valiantly, to ride out the deluge of dirt and shale, pitching and skidding with increased momentum into the delta at the bottom.

Tannehill kneed his mottled buckskin forward, drawling, "Take off pretty, Bucky boy, ain't no little mare goin' to show you up here." The gelding jumped out, strong and fearless, riding the dusty torrent of earth and stones down, ploughing powerfully to keep from being swamped, rocketing the last thirty feet in a straight breath-taking plunge, coming out of it squarely on all four feet, and shaking himself clean of the clinging dirt.

Dismounting in the trees, they cleaned out under their saddle blankets and double-rigged cinches, examining their horses' hoofs and legs for possible injuries from the shale. Back in the leather again, they traversed sparsely-forested hills toward the bottleneck entrance at the south end of the canyon, watching the open grasslands where the herd was being gathered and formed for the drive.

"If they start runnin' 'em now, we've got to turn them," Cordell said grimly. "Our bunch won't be up for half-an-hour or more."

"Sure looks like they're fixin' to start," said Tannehill, glancing uneasily toward the deep sharp cleft that marked the passage in the rocky walls.

A rifleshot sounded from the heights over that natural gateway, and at this signal the Hatchet cowhands set the herd in motion, Talboom building and stringing out his point, the swing riders yipping and yelling on the flanks, and others pushing and prodding in the dust of the drag. "Come on, boys!" Cordell said, and the three riders flattened their horses into a head-long run down the edge of the valley floor. If they didn't turn that point, the herd would be in the notch before Rubeling's crew ever got there to blockade it.

X

"HELL'S hinges!" Cordell cried suddenly. "They aren't drivin' that herd, they're stampedin' it!" He realized then that the lookout on the heights had seen the posse in the narrow cut below, and Hatchet meant to stampede the steers down on top of them. It was instantly and vividly gruesome in his mind, what a floodtide of berserk beef would do to Rubeling's party,

trapped in that steep, rockbound defile. Urging his mount into a reckless gallop, Cordell lifted his carbine out of his saddle-sheath and levered a shell into the chamber. Hammering along in his wake, Tannehill and Woodlee did likewise with their rifles.

Talboom and his men were howling and whooping like Apaches, lashing ropes and quirts at the heads and flanks of the cows, and firing into the air to complete the panic. Talboom had pulled off the point now, the lead steers bolting in a maddening rush for that cleft in the wall, the other crazed creatures thundering after them in the boiling dust. The ground trembled under thousands of beating hoofs.

Cordell opened fire at the dead run on the nearest swing riders, with Tannehill and Woodlee chiming in. One Hatchet horse and rider went barreling down in the clouding haze, and the others swung around to return the shots, lead singing and whining on the morning air. A running fight developed, with a lot of racket but little damage done, as there was no chance for accurate shooting with both sides at a full gallop. The stampede was on in all its terrible unleashed fury, a veritable avalanche of cattle roaring toward the pass and shaking the earth beneath it, dust storming high and red in the early sunlight.

Cordell led the way in a final desperate drive to reach the point, head off and swing the frenzied brutes, but the distance was too great, the time too short, the momentum of the herd unstoppable. There was nothing to do but fire into the lead steers and attempt to turn them that way. Converging on the point near the open gateway, they emptied their carbines into it. Steers fell and rolled under hammering hoofs, but the herd bucked and surged on over the fallen, stomping them to jelly and pouring on unchecked.

Pulling up and out of the brawling ruck, Cordell and his mates dismounted on a boulder-strewn shoulder close above the pass, their six-guns blazing steadily as they fired into the rush of cattle. But there was no stopping it.

They reloaded quickly, and barely in time, for Talboom was leading a charge at their position, and bullets were already screaming and ricocheting all about them. Talboom, tall and beak-faced in the saddle, with four horsemen at his heels, hurtling in at them with guns aflame. Cordell lined his carbine and squeezed off a swift shot, and Talboom flew from his horse's back, arms and legs awry, dead before he bounced on the sun-baked sod.

Tannehill and Woodlee made their shots count, spilling two more of the enemy riders, and the other two whirled and fled, hanging low on their ponies' necks. Tan and Woody switched their aim back into the torrent of beef. Cordell was lunging at a large boulder balanced on the rim of the ledge, directly over the pass. Laying his shoulder into it, driving hard with his booted feet, Ash heaved all his strength against the stone. It gave slowly, tottering, toppling at last, crushing a steer's back as it settled ponderously into the corridor. Cutting loose both his Colts then, Cordell rejoined his comrades, who were still blasting away. Gradually, as dead cattle piled up higher and higher around that boulder, a dam was formed, solid and lofty enough to finally check the stampede, turn the herd into a milling, slowing circle.

But more than enough cattle had gone through to obliterate a posse down there in the gulch.

Loading their heated guns once more, Cordell, Tannehill and Woodlee turned their sweat-shining powder-streaked faces to look for trouble up the valley. They had done their best, but Ash feared it wasn't good enough to save Rubeling and the rest.

Hatchet seemed to be through fighting, withdrawing toward the shadow of Cathedral Butte at the north end, leaving four dead men and a few dead horses on the plain. But there were more slain steers than anything else.

SHERIFF RUBELING, riding with his deputies at the head of the column, was nearly up to the valley entrance when the trample of a thousand hoofs reached him. Then the shooting broke out above, and the herd hit the pass like a tremendous avalanche.

"Ride or climb for it, men!" shouted Rubeling, but there was little time or room for either.

The posse was hopelessly trapped in the deep, narrow, stone-walled cut, with that oncoming mass of horned beef bearing

down on them with stunning speed and suddenness. Rubeling knew dread and horror as never before. The front riders had no choice but to try the sides. Those in the rear had some chance in flight.

Horses snorting and pitching in panic, the riders wheeled and scattered before that berserk juggernaut of beef. Rubeling drove his red roan at an almost sheer wall, with scrubby trees overhanging it from a ledge about thirty feet up. The great steed responded superbly, powering up somehow high enough so Rubeling could catch a handful of gnarled branches.

For a blood-freezing moment, Rubeling was hanging in midair, and then he hauled himself onto the shelf, struggling and straining with a strength born of fear and desperation. The horse planted his hoofs deep in a shaly spot and clung flattened there on the wall, ears flat and eyes rolling in terror. Rubeling started shooting into the boiling stream of cattle below.

Others were less fortunate than the sheriff. Chesbro's pinto, crazed with fright, reared high with pawing forelegs in the middle of the trail, and went shrieking over backwards under the terrible onslaught, the paint horse and Chesbro both instantly buried under tons of beef.

Old Pruett, the harness-maker, was hurled from his saddle and tossed from horned head to head, bouncing and torn until he disappeared under the hoofs. Paynter's sorrel stumbled and fell in front of the lead steers, and Paynter tried to claw his way up a sheer stonewall but was brushed off like a fly, trampled immediately under. Dust geysered up in the channel, with the bawling of beasts and the screaming of men. Rubeling went on swearing and shooting into the rampaging herd.

Little Koney went for the same wall and ledge that Rubeling was on, kicking out of the stirrups and stretching up enough to clamp his fingers on the sharp rim, hanging there until Rube dragged him up to safety. Koney's bay gelding slid back and was lost in the torrential current of cattle, while Koney dropped panting on the shelf. "Too old—for this," he gasped. "Never goin'—to get out from—that bar agian."

Deputies Maddern and Shokes were lucky enough to strike a slope of shale, and drive their mounts scrambling steeply up it and out of danger.

Those farther down the trail had a little more time to pick embankments their horses could climb, or to ride back to where the walls widened somewhat and there were zones of comparative safety off the trail. But not all of them escaped. Andruss, the man from Chimney Rocks, was pinned against a cliffside, crushed and ground to death with his mount. And Jencks, a hostler from the Riverside Corral in Cadmus, went down under the pulverizing hoofs. Others would have died there if the tide hadn't been stemmed by that blockade at the mouth of the pass.

The rock-walled corridor was ghastly with dead men, horses and steers, reeking like a charnel-house, as the survivors crept back into the trail with frozen faces and shocked eyes. A glance was enough to ascertain that the five posse members were beyond any help. Rubeling led the remainder of his troop up the passageway, over a barricade of dead beef, and into the valley. Cordell, Tannehill and Woodlee were in full command there, the Hatchet hands having vanished at the far end of the crescent.

"Thank God," breathed Cordell, scanning the haunted faces. "We thought you were all gone down there. How many, Rube?"

"Five," Rubeling said, naming them off: "Chesbro, Paynter, Pruett, Andruss, and Jencks."

Cordell shook his bared bronze head. "An awful price, Rube. "This valley has always been a valley of death."

"It would've been worse if you boys hadn't done a good job up here, Ash," Rubeling studied the heaped carcasses, the Hatchet corpses, and the herd that was grazing peacefully now. He swore softly. "Well, let's get this slaughterhouse cleaned up some."

Koney smiled sourly. "I ain't goin' to be much good at diggin' graves, Rube, until my stomach settles down some."

"We all need a break," Rubeling said, biting off a fresh chew of tobacco. "Anybody got any drinkin' liquor left in this outfit?"

A few bottles were produced and passed around, and the men rolled cigarettes or lighted their pipes.

"That Talboom out there?" Rubeling said thoughtfully. "Old Gurney's lost some of his best gunhands lately. Hodkey and Talboom here. Eakins and Blodwen in Scalplock Canyon. Thorner in Trelhaven, and Skowron'll never do any more gunslingin' either. And he's goin' to lose some more. Old Gurney Garriott's at the end of his road."

The tall sheriff turned his hawk-face on Cordell, the eagle eyes lighted. "You still want to be a deputy, Ash? I'm goin' to deputize the three of you, right here on the spot—Cordell, Tannehill and Woodlee. In force until Hatchet is smashed, the whole Garriott gang, every last damn one of 'em! You got any hunches now, Ash, go ahead and play 'em."

"It'll look like we're tryin' to get out of the dirty work here, Rube," said Cordell with a sober smile. "But I think us three ought to hit for Cadmus. There's goin' to be a weddin' I want to go to, and I think Kyler's probably back around there with Laidlaw and Hamrick."

Rubeling pondered this briefly and nodded. "All right, Ash. You've got a right to handle that end of it, I reckon, and here's to a clean sweep. We'll be ridin' on Hatchet when we get through here. It's time for Gurney himself to pay up, too."

"Thanks, Rube," said Cordell. "We'll see you back in the Flats."

The three mounted up again, waved in farewell, and clambered over the barrier of butchered stock, which was already swarming with flies and insects. Vultures were beginning to flap evilly overhead, as the trio of riders descended into the death-strewn corridor of stone.

THEY made fast time on the return trip, traveling alone and unencumbered, swapping horses at small ranches along the way. Everybody was talking about the war with Hatchet, and feeling was running higher than ever against the Garriotts. Every spread they stopped at was going to send men along when Ruebeling came out of the Shellerdines to march on the home layout of old Gurney Garriott. The army that Cordell had visualized, as necessary to wiping out Hatchet, was coming into existence at last. Ruebling would have more than enough manpower to overrun the decimated Garriott forces.

Riding day and night, with only a few hours' sleep in every twenty-four, Ash Cordell lost track of time, the days, and everything except the urgent driving need of getting to Cadmus Flats before Sue Ellen could marry Gene. The first thing he meant to do was break up that affair. Secondly, he had to run down Kyler Garriott, the murderer of his brother Clem, and with him Pretty Boy Laidlaw and Red Hamrick. After that, the prospects were more pleasant, involving Laura Delsing and another marriage that Cordell intended to consummate.

It was evening when they came in along Bittersweet Creek and saw the lights of Cadmus glimmering hazily across the Carikaree River. North Bridge boomed hollowly beneath their horses' hoofs, and then they cut across Western Avenue into an area of backyards and lots, to approach the natural terrace of Hillhouse Hotel from the rear. If Kyler and his two gun-sharps were in town, they might be watching the hotel and waiting for an opportunity to drygulch Cordell and his friends.

But they reached the stable without incident, and climbed down, weary and stiff with saddle-cramp, turning their spent horses over to Old Zach, the night hostler.

"Better saddle up some fresh ones, boys," suggested Cordell. "I'll go in and see what's cookin' in Cadmus. Ma must have heard from Sue Ellen before now."

"Bring back a bottle," Tannehill sighed. "I never needed stimulants so much in my life as I do right now."

"Bring two, Cord," said Bob Woodlee. "It'll take plenty firewater to keep me awake and movin' tonight."

Ma Muller was still at work in the kitchen, cleaning up for the night, her tired face and faded blue eyes lighting up at the sight of Cordell, disreputable looking as he was. His hard angular face, bristling with a bronze stubble of beard, black with powder, alkali and dirt, had aged and hollowed in the past week. His clothes were sweated out, brush-torn, filthy and drenched with dust.

"Thank the Lord you're back safe, Ash boy," she said. "How did it go after you left the Delsings?"

Cordell told her, tersely and concisely. Then his gray eyes narrowed intently on

her. "Where is she, Ma? Where's Sue Ellen?"

"How would I know where anybody is, Ash?" she sputtered. "I never step a foot out of this kitchen. I—"

"You know, Ma," he interrupted quietly. "Tell me now."

Ma Muller sat down quickly, heavily, as if her legs would no longer support her weight. Resting her elbows on the table, she held her broad face in her veined hands. "I don't know, Ash. I just don't know where the girl is."

"The Delsings still in town?"

"Yes, they're here in the hotel. Dan's comin' along fine. Laura, of course, has been worryin' herself sick."

"Any other news, Ma?"

"I hear Kyler Garriott's back here, with Hamrick and Laidlaw."

"That's good. Now tell me about Sue Ellen. You're an awful poor liar, Ma." Cordell smiled gently, and stroked her bent gray head.

"Ash, I can't," she mumbled through her fingers. "I can't tell you, Ash, you've got to leave them alone. Kill Kyler, if you must, but let Sue have Gene. It's all she wants in this world. Please, Ash boy, please!"

"The Garriotts had our folks murdered, Ma. I'd rather see Sue Ellen dead than with one of them!"

"Gene didn't do it, Ash. Gene never killed anybody. He's a good boy, Ash. He'll make Sue a good husband."

"He's a Garriott," said Cordell coldly. "That's enough. Where are they, Ma? They're around here somewhere, I know they are. You'd better tell me the truth."

Ma Muller moaned and let her arms fall helplessly on the table, a martyred look of anguish on her face. "In the church, Ash," she said, her lips scarcely moving. "They're gettin' married tonight." She laughed with a bitter sound. "Tonight of all nights; Couldn't you have stayed away a few more hours, Ash?"

"It wouldn't make any difference, Ma. I'd never let her stay married to a Garriott." He touched her silvered head tenderly and slammed out the door, holding down on his guns as he ran for the stable, thinking of the day he had found Clem practicing his draw out there.

Tannehill and Woodlee had the fresh horses saddled, and were slumped down in exhaustion on bales of hay in the corner, while Old Zach rubbed down the trail-worn animals. They looked up, scowling when they saw Cordell empty-handed.

Just in time for the weddin', boys," Cordell told them. "Our three friends are in town, too. The drink'll have to wait a little."

Groaning, they stepped into the leather and loped toward the front of Hillhouse, pausing for a moment before the gallery. Front Street lay straight beneath them, quiet at this end, loud and gaudy in its remote reaches. The church spire showed white and thin over the outer portion of Court Street. Cordell swung his hand, and they dropped down the grade and across Western Avenue at a gallop, the remounts strong and lively between their thighs.

They were drawing abreast of the adobe bank building on the corner of Court Street, when flames split the night with a roar, leaping out from the far corner of Murphy's Market across the way on their left. Bullets hummed close and screeched off adobe, as they threw their horses into the nearest right-hand alley.

"Cord, you better get on to the church," drawled Tannehill. "Woody and I'll handle this here."

"Sure, Ash," said Woodlee. "We'll take care of this end of it."

Cordell thought it over quickly. "Well, this is one weddin' I sure don't want to be late for, boys." Wheeling his horse, he drove back the length of the alley and cut across backyards into Court Street. Shots rang after him as he lined out past the courthouse toward the church at the far end.

While the snipers were shooting at Cordell, Tannehill and Woodlee dashed their mounts straight across Front Street and swung down in the shelter of the near wall of Murphy's Market.

"I'll circle around back and smoke 'em out, Tan," said Bob Woodlee. " figure these are my two boys."

"Leave me one of 'em, Woody," drawled Tannehill. "If I can't drink, I want to fight."

Woodlee mounted again and rode toward the rear of the huge store, while Tannehill

peeped around the front corner. Wisps of smoke curled from the alley at the other end of Murphy's, but that was all. This part of the town seemed empty and deserted. Down at the east end, there were racked horses, wagons, and riders and pedestrians were milling about in the yellow light of kerosene flares and lamps. Koney's Longhorn and other saloons, the Golden Wheel and the Rio Belle were doing a brisk business as usual. The saddle-and-harness shop of old Pruett, dead up there in the Shellerdines, looked desolate and dark. Tannehill hefted his Colt. 44 and waited, his long frame loose and easy, hoping they were up against Laidlaw and Hamrick, and he would get a fair crack at one or the other.

BOB WOODLEE, alert in the saddle, drifted through backyard darkness at the rear of the Market, gun balanced in his right hand, as he held the nervous horse in with his left. A blinding explosion all but scorched his eyeballs and set the gray gelding to rearing and pitching, as Woodlee fired back, having glimpsed the pretty features of Laidlaw in the muzzle-light.

But Laidlaw was gone, whipping into a narrow aperture between two low sheds, legging it out toward the deeper backlots and the river. Quieting the horse, Woodlee sidled him against one of the shacks, freed his boots from the stirrups, and hoisted himself onto the flat roof. Racing back along the rooftop, he saw that the slender passage between the walls was vacant now.

At the rear of the roof, Woodlee flung himself flat as roaring fire burst upward at him from a huddle of ashcans and rubbish barrels. Crawling closer to the edge, Woodlee tilted his gun down and turned loose a couple of shots, the recoils jerking his wrist. The slugs screamed off metal and Laidlaw was moving again, running toward the Riverside Corral.

Woodlee left the roof in a reckless leap and took after the baby-faced killer, heedless of everything but running him down. Flame torched back at him again and something smashed him to a sudden, stumbling halt, his left shoulder numbed by a terrific sledging blow. Woodlee went down on hands and knees in the thin grass, rolling desperately as fire licked toward him again. Spotting the dim shadowy outline of Laidlaw's graceful dodging figure, Woodlee raised his Colt, lined it steady, and triggered.

The Pretty Boy was down now, gasping and threshing in the weeds, and Bob Woodlee smiled as he crept forward, the pain breaking through the numbness and squeezing the sweat out all over him in large drops.

Laidlaw was no longer pretty when Woodlee reached him; eyes bulging, mouth distorted, but still trying to get his gun up. "Remember up on the Bittersweet?" panted Woodlee. "Remember—how you laughed—Laidlaw?" Laughing weakly himself, Woodlee hammered his gun barrel down across that twisted sweating face, and Laidlaw screamed through the blood, "No, no! . . . ." Woodlee said, "Laugh, Pretty Boy, laugh!" and he struck again with the steel barrel, feeling the bones of the face give in under it. Laidlaw's last scream was soundless behind that bloody ruined mask, as he slumped back, still and dead in the dusty weeds.

Satisfied and too tired to care much about anything else, Woodlee dropped wearily beside him.

Tannehill, hearing the gunfire out back and seeing nobody emerge in the street, turned and ran toward the rear of the alley, coming out into the cluttered dimness and rubble of the backyard, just as the broad massive bulk of Red Hamrick appeared at the far corners of Murphy's Market. They fired simultaneously. Tannehill, ducking away from a vicious spray of splinters, saw Hamrick jerk and stiffen as the lead struck him. But the great bull of a man held his feet, leaning back against the loading platform of the store, shooting again as Tannehill stalked toward him, window-glass breaking at Tan's right with a crashing jangle.

Still walking forward in loping strides, Tannehill brought his gun level and fired twice, the bright flashes stabbing the shadows, tearing Hamrick away from the wood, spinning him in slow backward circles, dropping him heavily into an awkward sitting position.

Using both hands and groaning with the effort, Hamrick heaved his gun up but the orange flame blossomed high into the air. Tannehill, slouching close now with limber

effortless ease, threw down once more with his .44 Colt, the blast lighting Hamrick's ugly snarling face, rocking the red head, stretching him back full length in the dirt.

Tannehill looked down at him for a long moment, reloading his gun with deft automatic fingers. The shooting out toward the Carikaree had ceased some time ago. Tannehill spat on the ground, his lean face sharp and solemn with a yellow flare in the eyes, and walked on, a slim whiplash figure, to find Woodlee.

Running footsteps pounded closer in the street but Tannehill paid no attention. He hoped Woody was all right. They might make that wedding yet.

XI

THE whitewashed frame structure had been modeled after the old Colonial churches of New England. Severely simple and plain, with a square bell-tower surmounted by a graceful tapered spire, it had a clean austere beauty and dignity that was incongruous in a crude town like Cadmus Flats. Tonight the church was lighted, but the tall stained windows permitted no view of the interior.

Ash Cordell left his horse at the hitch-rail on the side, and walked around to the front where the outer double-doors were ajar. Stepping reluctantly into the vestibule, he moved stealthily to an inner doorway and peered into the main room, feeling like an intruder.

Sue Ellen and Gene Garriott were standing before the altar over which a cadaverous-faced minister presided. There were two old ladies in attendance. Apparently the ceremony was about to begin. Sue Ellen, her hair golden in the candlelight, was a lovely figure in her white gown. Gene looked tall, handsome and distinguished in a dark blue, tailored suit. A fine looking couple to the casual observer but not to Ash Cordell. It wasn't much of a wedding, he thought. There was something hasty and furtive about it.

Cordell didn't like this breaking into a religious service, but there was no other way to stop it. Suddenly and painfully conscious of his dirty, tattered clothing and unshaven face, he stepped inside and paced down the aisle, hat in hand.

The parson stared aghast at him until the others turned their startled faces. The elderly ladies looked ready to scream, and Sue Ellen seemed on the verge of fainting. Gene's face was suddenly murderous.

"Ash!" cried Sue Ellen. "Please, Ash, you know better than this!"

"Who is this man?" demanded the minister.

"Her brother," Cordell said. "I've got a right to be here. Sorry, folks, but there isn't goin' to be any weddin'. I'm a deputy sheriff too, and I'm arrestin' Gene Garriott."

"For what?" Gene asked disgustedly. "You're crazy, Ash. Get out of here and leave us alone, you fool!"

"You're wanted, Gene. All you Garriotts are wanted. For murder, cattle rustlin', and other things. Come on, Gene, I'm takin' you."

"I wish I had a gun on me!"

"You'd still come, gun or no gun. Come on, I don't want to rough you up in church."

The minister raised his hand. "Young man, you are desecrating the House of God!" he declared in sonorous tones.

Cordell smiled gravely. "Any house with a Garriott in it is desecrated. Come on out with me, Gene."

Gene glared in helpless rage. Sue Ellen had collapsed sobbing into a front pew, and the old ladies were striving to console her, darting scathing glances at Cordell and his two holstered guns, from time to time. The parson stood with his hands folded, a severe wrathful look frozen on his gaunt pale face.

Cordell strode forward and clutched Gene's arm. Garriott wrenched violently away from him. Ash drew his right-hand gun and jabbed the muzzle into the big man's ribs. "Outside, Gene, or I'll bend this iron over your head!" Garriott gestured despairingly and started up the aisle, with Cordell walking after him, sheathing the gun. The faint broken sobbing of Sue Ellen followed them into the vestibule, and there Ash closed the door on it and motioned Gene outside.

In the front yard they stood staring at one another with that bone-deep lifelong hatred springing from innermost depths into their eyes. Cordell was ragged and filthy before Garriott's groomed elegance.

"We found Hodkey's valley in the Shel-

lerdines where you hide the stolen cattle, Gene," said Cordell evenly. "The same valley where Gurney had my father and mother killed seventeen years back."

"I don't know a thing about that, Ash."

"Hatchet burnt the Delsings out and killed young Fritz up on Wagon Mound just like they burnt the Woodlees out five or six years ago, only they burned Mr. and Mrs. Woodlee with the place."

"I had nothing to do with either of those cases," Gene said. "I never took part in any of those things and you know it, Ash."

"All right, then," Cordell said. "Tell me about my mother and father."

"I don't know anything about it."

Cordell smiled thinly. "Well, you're a Garriott. You might as well die with the rest of 'em."

"I haven't got a gun, Ash," protested Gene.

"Here's one!" Cordell drew his left-hand gun and tossed it on the sun-dried lawn near Gene's boots. "Pick it up. I won't make a move until you get hold of it. See?" He held his open hands spread shoulder-high.

Gene looked from the gun at his feet to Cordell, and back again to the revolver. Cordell stood motionless, hands level with his wide shoulders. Gene slid his boots apart and bent his knees slightly, crouching, nerving himself for the vital daring move.

"I won't do it," he finally muttered.

"You'll either reach, or talk," Cordell told him. "It's a lot easier and safer to talk, Gene."

"I've got nothing to say to you."

"Look, Hatchet's busted. You Garriotts are all through runnin' the Carikaree. Gurney's got nothin' left, not even a prayer. You won't be givin' anybody away, Gene."

Gene crouched a trifle lower. "I won't talk. And this isn't an even break on the draw, Ash."

"It is with my hands up here," Cordell said. "I won't move until your hand is on the gun."

"It still isn't a fair chance."

"Quit cryin'," Cordell said. "It's more of a chance than Clem had. Or my father and mother. Or young Fritz Delsing. And hundreds of others. Reach before I beat your head in!"

Gene Garriott's hand went to the gun on the grass like a striking snake, and Cordell's right hand streaked down from its shoulder-high position as Gene's fingers closed on the grounded weapon. Cordell's Colt flashed clear and blazed first, and Gene's exploded into the turf as the slug shattered his forearm. Dirt spattered across Ash's legs, and Gene let go of the gun as blood coursed down, dripping from his fingers.

The minister appeared in the church door. Cordell waved his .44 at him, saying: "Get back inside. Nobody's hurt here—yet." The white face vanished at once.

Gene straightened up slowly, holding his broken arm across his waistline, supported by his left hand. Staring down at it, he shook his head, the black curls falling picturesquely on his glistening wet forehead. After a while Gene looked up Cordell.

"All right, Ash. Go ahead and shoot."

"I want to find out a few things first, Gene. What's the connection between your family and mine?"

Garriott laughed contemptuously. "Connection? Why, nothing, except we took you in and gave you a home. Fed you, clothed you, educated you, brought you up decent. And all we get from you— is *this!*"

"Talk straight or I'll beat it out of you! Wasn't my mother a Garriott?"

Gene tried to sneer. "I hardly think so! Go ahead, kill me."

"If I wanted to kill you you'd be dead now. Or long before now," Ash said. "I just want to hear the truth, Gene. And you want to live and marry Sue Ellen, don't you? All you've got to do is talk. Didn't Hatchet belong to my mother once?"

"You *are* crazy!"

Cordell clipped him across the head with his gun barrel. Gene dropped to his knees. Blood trickled down his face.

"Talk, damn you!" grated Cordell. "We're cousins, aren't we? Second cousins, I mean."

"All right, I'll talk." Gene wiped the blood from his eyes with his left hand. "Yes, we're second cousins. Your mother—Gurney's first cousin. She inherited Hatchet, but—"

"When she married my father Gurney drove her out," Cordell finished tautly. "When Gurney found them up in the Shellerdines he had them both killed. Isn't that right?"

The kneeling man nodded. "Yes. I didn't know about it until Kyler told me once. Gurney didn't want me to know. Said I was different . . ." Gene looked up ferociously. "Come on, get it over with!"

"My grandfather was the brother of Gurney's father," Cordell mused wonderingly. "I began to think when I saw that picture in the office at the Big House." Cordell picked the gun off the ground, sheathed both of them, and lifted Gene to his feet. "Go on in there and get married," he said. "If that's what Sue wants, it's good enough for me. And you aren't to blame for what Gurney and Kyler have done, Gene. Hurry up and get that arm to a doctor, boy."

Gene blinked disbelievingly, then smiled. "You really mean it, Ash. Well, that's going to make it a lot better all around." Holding his broken arm across his chest, he walked toward the church entrance, pausing on the broad steps to say: "Sue Ellen's going to be very happy, Ash."

"I hope so," Cordell said, smiling back at him. "Tell that parson to come up to the Hillhouse when he gets through with you folks. I reckon he can stand two weddin's in one night."

Gene went inside the church, and Cordell stood gazing at it for an interval, deep in thought. At last he knew the whole story, in bare outline anyway, and it was as he had gradually come to formulate and believe it, in his mind. Then, remembering that Tannehill and Woodlee were in trouble on the other side of town, Cordell started toward the corner and his horse. He had one thing left to do, before he could marry Laura Delsing, and that was to kill Kyler Garriott. He ought to cancel that order for the preacher, but he wasn't going back into that church tonight. Absently, he replaced the spent shell.

Cordell was suddenly aware of rapidly onrushing hoofbeats, and a shot roared out from behind him, the bullet burring close and splintering the façade of the church. Spinning and drawing lightning fast, Ash saw a huge white horse hurtling straight in at him, looming gigantic in the vague light. The flash of another shot speared toward him.

Quicker than thought, Cordell hit the turf in a flat headlong dive, sliding into the angle formed by the steps and the building itself, his head ramming solid wood with a stunning shock that jarred all the way to his flying bootheels. A slug ripped a shower of splinters from the stairs, as the white horse thundered past. Cordell glimpsed a black-garbed lanky figure in the saddle, and knew it was Kyler Garriott. The last big showdown was at hand, and Ash was lucky to have lived through this much of it. Kyler must have been awful over-anxious to miss three times like that, even if he was on a galloping steed.

Twisting around in the grass, shaking his head to clear the aching haze, Cordell fired from the ground just as the white horse made a rearing starfishing turn. The shot struck that high silvery body, and the horse screamed with a horrid human note, fell floundering backward in the swirling dust. Kyler Garriott flung himself clear of the leather, and lighted catlike on his feet in the shadow of the great gnarled live oak beyond the church.

Cordell was up by that time, striding forward with gun in hand, and Kyler came out to meet him, a towering black figure that blended into the dark background, while Cordell was plainly silhouetted against the white church. They fired almost together, the flames lashing out brilliant and loud, and Cordell felt the hot lead fan his cheek, as Kyler staggered slightly with dust puffing from his black shirt.

Thumbing the hammer swiftly, Cordell lined his Colt and let go another shot, the slug slamming Kyler into a back-tracking teeter, his right hand jerking high as the gun went off, the bullet clanging the bell in the church tower. Shot through twice, Kyler was still on his feet, lurching but upright, trying to level his right-hand gun and draw left-handed at the same time.

BUT Ash Cordell, swinging into a balanced crouch, had freed his trigger finger and was fanning the hammer with the heel of his left palm now, the .44 held firmly in the right, bucking with each bellowing roar, three swift shots blazing and blending into one tremendous sustained blast.

Kyler blundered backward, jolted by each successive smash, until he bounced

from the trunk of the live oak, twirled in a foolish, flop-armed, jack-kneed arc, and toppled slowly at last in a long stilted stagger, his snarling coyote-face rooting the earth.

Turning wearily and walking back toward the church, the gun hanging loosely in his hand, Cordell was dully surprised to see a small crowd of men gathered there, afoot and on horseback, and among them the tall whiplike leanness of Tannehill.

"He sure took a lot of killin', Tan," said Cordell. "Where's Woody?"

"Caught one in the shoulder, Cord, but he'll be all right," Tannehill said. "He got Laidlaw and I took Hamrick. So this just about winds it up."

"And high time, Tanny," murmured Cordell, shaking his sweaty bronze head.

Tannehill looked at the lighted church windows. "What about the weddin', Cord?"

"It's goin' on. I got the story out of Gene, and I sent him back in to Sue Ellen," Cordell smiled wryly. "That's what she wants, and I guess Gene's all right. I've busted up enough things anyway."

"So you know the story, Cord? But you don't know the endin'." Tannehill's smile was bright and boyish. "Some riders just came in from Hatchet. Old Gurney's gone too, Cord. Shot himself when he heard what happened up in the Shellerdines, and found out that Rube was headin' his way with the biggest posse this country ever saw."

Cordell regarded him with mild wonder. "Old Gurney, too? Well, that does wind it up."

"Gurney left a letter before he swallowed that gun muzzle," Tannehill drawled on tantalizingly. "Right interestin', that letter, so they say. A full confession, you might call it."

"That so?" Cordell was trying to taper up a smoke with fingers that felt thick and numb, and he didn't seem unduly interested.

"Yeah, quite a thing," Tannehill went on, undaunted. "They tell me, Cord, you've got yourself a ranch. The biggest spread in these parts."

Cordell laid a long arm on Tannehill's rangy shoulders. "Reckon I've got me a foreman, too. And we'll have a pretty fair tophand when Woody's shoulder gets healed. Now I've got to see about gettin' a woman to keep house, I suppose."

A hand plucked at Cordell's ragged shirtsleeve, and a soft familiar voice said: "That shouldn't be very hard for a man like you, Ash. Especially with those whiskers, and the way you dress."

Then Laura Delsing was in his arms, the whole lovely length of her moulded against his rawboned frame, her mouth reaching eagerly up to his, heedless of the beard-stubble and powdergrime.

"You wouldn't marry a man that looks like this, would you?" Cordell asked.

"Why sure," Laura smiled, imitating the way Ash said it. "As long as you're going to own the biggest ranch in the Carikaree."

"Well, one thing is sure," drawled Tannehill, grinning and scratching his own rusty whiskers. "You'll have the best-lookin' best man in this valley, and that's whatever."

"At Hillhouse we can wash, change, and get that drink we missed," Cordell suggested.

"Why not hit this preacher when he's all set up for business?" inquired Tannehill.

"He's comin' up to the hotel later," Cordell said, still holding Laura and breathing in the sweet clean smell of her.

"Nothin' like confidence!" marveled Tannehill, laughing. "This Cord's up against the fastest gun in the country, and he ain't even asked the girl. But that don't stop him from orderin' up a parson!"

THE LONG AUGUST NIGHT WAS HOT—but not as hot as the bitter fighting that raged about Agok, Korea, in the Naktong River area. Sergeant Kouma, serving as tank commander, was covering the withdrawal of infantry units from the front. Discovering that his tank was the only obstacle in the path of an enemy breakthrough, Sergeant Kouma waged a furious nine-hour battle, running an eight-mile gantlet through enemy lines. He finally withdrew to friendly lines, but not until after his ammunition was exhausted and he had left 250 enemy dead behind him. Even then, although wounded twice, he attempted to resupply his tank and return to the fighting.

"A withdrawing action is not my idea of how Americans should fight," says Ernest Kouma. "If we must fight, let's be strong enough to take the offensive. In fact, *if we're strong enough*, we may not have to fight at all. Because, nowadays, *peace is for the strong.*

"So let's build our strength—let's build and build to keep a strong America at peace. That's where *you* come in. You can help by buying U. S. Defense Bonds. Buy as many Bonds as you think you can afford. Then buy some more. It's a far less painful sacrifice to build for peace, than it is to destroy in war. And *peace* is what you're investing in when you buy Defense Bonds."

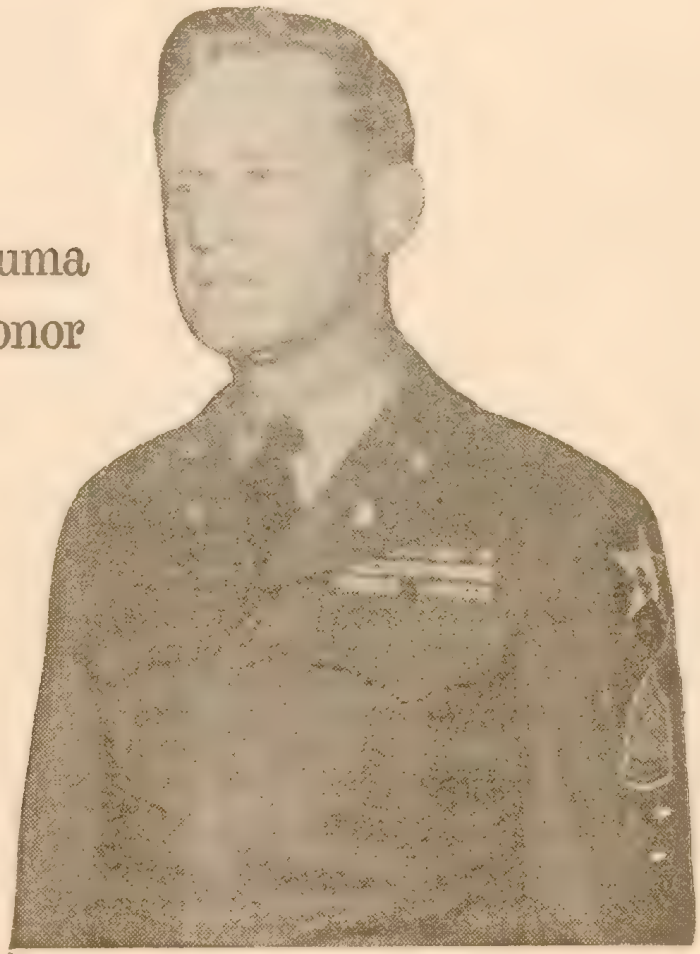
★ ★ ★

Remember that when you're buying bonds for national defense, you're also building a personal reserve of cash savings. Remember that if you don't save regularly, you generally don't save at all. So sign up in the Payroll Savings Plan where you work, or the Bond-A-Month Plan where you bank. For your country's security, and your own, buy Defense Bonds now!

Peace is for the strong... Buy U. S. Defense Bonds now!

M/Sgt. Ernest R. Kouma

Medal of Honor



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The SADDLE WOLVES

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

"Free range," they said. And the lush Circle W became prowling ground for every night-riding beef scavenger in the Oxbow . . . till Jim Wister, the ex-Ranger, came roaring home to stake his gun-claw claim on the vultures' acreage.

HE HAD been riding northward for a week. After he crossed the Red River from Texas into the Indian Nations, the mountains in the southeast corner of this wild and lawless land rose like a dark cloud before him. Finally the trees of the mountainside reached out and enwrapped him, and Jim Wister rode into his home settlement of Oxbow in the heavy heat of late afternoon.

He saw that his horse had a drink, then dismounted and tied him to the hitch-rail in front of the livery stable. Then he leaned against the livery stable wall while he fashioned himself a cigarette. This kept his hands busy while his eyes searched the street. Four years in the Rangers down in Texas had built the habit of caution in him, and the word he had got from Ed Malone had given him reason to believe that he needed plenty of that quality now.

Oxbow was just a wide place in the mountain road on which he had ridden in. The Trader's Mercantile was the biggest building on the dusty street, its frame structure a hundred feet across the front. Two saloons, a saddle shop, a barber shop, and a few other scattered buildings and shacks, dry and drab in the shimmering heat, completed the picture.

This was a Tuesday, and Wister noted that there were more saddle horses at the rack than he would have expected to see on a workday. He turned his attention to the horse and buggy standing at the rail in front of The Trader's.

This was a rig that he was not glad to see, for it belonged to Martha Terrill, and like everything belonging to Terrill's Box T, it was spic and span, and spoke of money and of pride. The buggy was shiny black, with red wheels and buff fringed canopy top, the team was a matched pair of small high-stepping bays whose harness and buckles glistened in the sun.

Pride and money; those were the things that had come between him and Martha Terrill. Not Martha's pride, but her father's. Old Bob Terrill had a sense of his own power, and he was not a man who could see the fitness of his daughter marrying the son of a small rancher such as Jim Wister's father had been.

But that affair was over; it had been over for four years.

Then the girl came out of the store. Jim Wister saw her and felt a tug inside him which told him it was not over, it would never be over.

Wister drank in the sight of her as a thirsty man might drink cool water. Her figure was small and trim, and she had always carried herself as straight as an arrow. That was part of the expression of Terrill pride showing in her very carriage. She wore a gray dress and a tiny green hat perched slightly forward on a wealth of hair of such shining bronze that it was almost red.

He watched her get into the buggy. A pain greater almost than it had ever been, bit deeply into him. Why, in four years, couldn't it have healed a little? His cigarette burned his fingers and he did not know it.

THE trouble burst out all at once. A hound had flushed a badger out from under the wooden walk of the store, chasing it out from under the boards and tangling with it in a loud wild fight under the Terrill team's hooves.

The nervous horses spooked instantly; one of them reared up on his hind feet and came down, his hooves scraping the legs of

Wister lashed his horse mercilessly, pushing him up alongside the careening buggy. There were inches between his mount's hooves and the cliff edge.

the other one. The animals suddenly twisted the buggy tongue halfway around as they fought the reins. They got their heads down to their knees at the same time, getting the bits in their teeth. And then they set out down the street at a mad run. The girl in the seat see-sawed the reins in a vain effort to get them under control.

Wister made three jumps to his horse, untying him as the team took a sharp curve in the road at a speed which lifted the buggy's outside wheels almost high enough to throw the buggy over on its side. The buggy hit a rock and bounced high in the air, lifting the girl off her seat. Her hat flew off and her hair came loose and flew back over her shoulders.

Wister was on his horse, wheeling it on a dime, and spurring it down the street. The team had the buggy bouncing along the rocky road on a downhill pull now. Their heads were out straight and they ignored the steep bluff which walled one side of the narrow trail, and the precipitous drop on the other.

The buggy hubbed a sapling on the high side and the force of the impact threw it the width of the road. Except for a rock imbedded in the clay, the wheel would have passed over the lip of the precipice.

Jim Wister lashed his animal mercilessly with his reins as he closed ground between them. A hundred yards, then fifty, separated him from the careening buggy. And then his hopes sank. The road was so narrow that he would hardly have room to draw alongside the flying vehicle.

He pulled his horse up just behind the buggy and shouted an encouraging word to the girl. She turned, and he saw her frightened face as she looked hopefully at him. She was holding both reins, but they had hooked under the neck yoke during the first excitement, and no amount of pulling on them would bring the team's heads up so that they could be controlled.

The downhill road took a sudden turn around the mountainside and leveled off for a hundred yards or so. And at this point it became slightly wider for a short distance, and then narrowed down again.

Wister saw that this was the only chance he had. He lashed his horse furiously, pushing him up alongside the careening buggy. It was only a matter of inches between his horse's feet and the cliff.

He got his feet out of the stirrups, pushed himself up into a standing position on his saddle and jumped.

He landed safely in the buggy, grabbing the back of the seat with one hand and the dashboard with the other.

He stepped over the dashboard onto the doubletree, got a handhold on the backstrap of each horse's harness, and walked forward on the bouncing buggy tongue until he had reached the horses' withers. He got a good grip on the backband of one of the horses and got down so that he had one knee on the buggy tongue, then reaching out with his other hand, he managed after several tries to loosen the rein hooked over the neck yoke.

Freeing the reins thus gave the girl more slack, which she took up quickly. Now she could raise the horses' heads and make them feel the pull on the bits in their mouths. She quickly brought them to a stop as Wister walked back on the tongue and dropped into the buggy seat beside her. The sudden release from their tension left them both limp and silent for a long moment.

She sat still and without speaking for a while, her face white under her ivory t...

"Thanks, Jim," she said finally. "What else can I say?"

"You might say hello," he grinned. "I've been away for a while. Or did you know?"

"So you have," she answered. "And under the circumstances, I'm certainly glad you came back just when you did."

That was about as far as they got when the embarrassment he had dreaded descended upon him.

"I—our place was getting run down, and I came back to try to get things straightened out. Thought maybe I could sell it."

And then they heard the horses coming at a gallop from town. People back there had finally got moving. The girl turned her head and saw the horsemen rounding the bend in the wooded road, her father in the lead.

She turned back to Wister.

"I think I'd better be the first to tell you, Jim," she said. "I'm engaged to marry Vince Harmon."

The blow struck him hard. All he could feel was a bottomless pit of black emptiness inside himself.

THREE men drew up behind the buggy on sweaty horses. Wister recognized old Bob Terrill, rawhide lean, red hair faded to gray, but still sitting straight and proud in his saddle. Jim made a gesture of greeting to his old friend Vince Harmon. Now there was a stiffness about Vince's greeting that Wister could not miss. He turned to glance at the third man.

He had seen Colonel Buckner often in his younger day, but he did not know him. Nobody knew the Colonel; he unbent to nobody.

Wister crawled out of the buggy as Martha's father rode up. The old man could not find words to express his relief, but Wister saw the meaning of his gesture of taking his handkerchief out of his pocket and sponging his face with it. Old Terrill had been scared speechless, and now his relief was leaving him that way. This mountain road was a dangerous thing for a runaway team to negotiate.

It was one of those sitautions in which anything said was likely to sound foolish. Everybody had been scared, and everybody was relieved, and it would have sounded awkward for people of this kind to say such things under such circumstances.

Martha felt it and tried to break it up.

"Well, why all the long faces? Here I am in as good shape as ever." Then she added, "Thanks to Jim. He stopped the team."

This brought her father out of his silence. He turned to Wister and said, "Thanks, young man. I'm—" His sharp eyes serached Wister's face, and Jim saw recognition dawn on him. "Why, you're young Wister."

"Yes."

"I appreciate your help, of course. You've probably saved Martha from serious injury, and I won't forget it."

"Forget it," Wister answered. He saw his horse grazing up the road, the reins dragging.

"I'll be getting along."

Vince Harmon had not offered to shake hands with Wister, but as the latter started toward his horse, Harmon moved his own mount over alongside him.

"Look, Jim," he said. "I want you to know that I really appreciate your doing that for Martha. You see—well, hell, man, you'll hear about it soon enough. Martha and I—"

"Yeah. I've already heard about it," Wister answered.

As he picked up his reins, Colonel Buckner pulled up beside him. Buckner sat his horse like an old cavalry officer, his heavy body proudly erect in the saddle, his thick, red-veined face dripping perspiration.

"You say your name was Wister?" he demanded.

"I believe I mentioned it to Terrill," Jim said shortly. He did not like Buckner's arrogance.

"What are you doing around here?"

"That, my friend, is none of your damned business!" Wister's temper exploded suddenly.

"The reason I asked is because I like to know who's milling around loose in this country. And if I catch you on my range I'll get a more civil answer to the next question I ask you."

"You might and you might not," Wister answered. He mounted his horse and pushed on back toward town where he met Ed Malone, the friend who had written to him in Texas.

"Just get in?"

"Yeah," Jim answered, not mentioning the runaway. "What's the trouble?"

"Your ranch. Everybody wants it, and they're shifting this way and that, and making deals and sparring for openings to get it.

"You could lose that place, Jim, and it's too good to lose. You should have been here taking care of it all the time, instead of leaving it for Dirk Blair to run. He's just about run it into the ground."

"I thought Blair knew cattle," Wister countered.

He did not tell Malone that the real reason he had not come home to take charge when his father died was that he did not want to be so close to Martha Terrill.

"He knows cattle, all right," Malone answered. "And he knows how to look after himself. At your expense."

"What's he doing?"

"What ain't he doing? He's selling off your stock for one thing, and again I wouldn't trust him, but me, I think he'd steal his grandmaw's false teeth out of her head while she was asleep."

"Got a bad reputation, has he?"

"He's ruined Circle W since your dad passed on."

"How come the neighbors haven't taken care of him?"

"Maybe the neighbors think they can use him against each other. Like I say, everybody wants the place. The strongest man is likely to get it, and some of the rest of them is likely to die trying to get it."

"There seems to be just one little item they overlook," Jim Wister said. "And that is, that Circle W is mine. After they kill each other off, it's still mine."

"If you can hold it," Malone said. "But Colonel Buckner is putting the word out that it has been abandoned by the owners and that it harbors rustlers, and so it reverts back to public domain. That's his way of announcing that it belongs to anybody who has the guts to take it—meaning himself, of course."

"Buckner, huh? How does Vince Harmon stand?" Wister had tried to keep from asking the question, wanting to be fair to the man who had been his friend as well as Malone's.

"I don't know, Jim. Vince used to be a decent guy. But he's changed a lot. Gambles too much, and don't never win. Hangs out with Buckner some. And then—" Malone's voice trailed off.

"Martha was telling me she's going to marry Vince."

"It ain't none of my business," Malone said quickly. "But if you ask me, he ain't marrying Martha so much as he is figgering on marrying Terrill's Box T. Vince has developed an awful ambition lately. But, on the other hand, Ruby Buckner is not hard to look at. That's the Colonel's daughter."

"Do you think he's lined up with the rest of them to take a bite out of my place?"

"If he ain't, then he's the only one that ain't," Malone said, getting to his feet. "What are you going to do about it?"

"I reckon my first job is to clean house out at my place," Wister said. "You wouldn't know anybody that would be looking for a job of work for a while, would you? Work that might be dangerous."

"It just happens that I ain't doing anything right now," Malone said seriously. "And if you hadn't asked me, I was going to go along with you, anyway."

II

JIM WISTER had been raised on the Circle W, which was to the east of Terrill's Box T, sharing with it a mountain valley of something more than ten thousand acres. His mother was buried in a little square plot under a clump of weeping willows below a spring, and now since he had left some four years ago after his break with Martha Terrill, his father had also been buried there.

As to his father's death, he knew little. The old man had met with an accident some three years ago when a horse had stepped into a hole and thrown him, breaking his hip. The old man had been pretty well laid up after that, having hired a foreman by the name of Dirk Blair, who, according to the old man's infrequent letters, knew cows and was an efficient boss.

Jim and Malone were riding out along the moonlit road when Jim asked, "Just what did you hear about my old man's death? I got a letter from Blair saying he was kicked to death by a wild horse. Said he must have gone into the corral with him and got kicked while nobody was around to help him. That's all Blair said."

"It could have been so," Malone answered. "They found him in the corral, and a lot of bones busted."

"But nobody saw the accident?"

"From what they say, there was nobody else around the lot when it happened. Why were you asking?"

"You were saying everybody wanted that place."

"There are people who have thought of that," Malone admitted. "And I'm one of them. But what can you do? Nobody saw anything."

"It's something to keep in mind," Wister said.

The Circle W ranchhouse sat on the south slope of a mountainside, the spot having been selected as protection against the winter's winds and snows. The house was a substantial structure with two wide wings of heavy hewn log walls on the first floor, and boards on the second.

They had seen a light at one of the windows, but as they rode up, the light had suddenly vanished, leaving the place in darkness.

They rode to the front porch and Wister called out, "Hello."

There was a brief silence, then the voice came from within.

"Who is it? What's wanted?"

"Wister. Want to talk to you."

After a moment the door came open, a man stepped out, and the door closed behind him. Wister and Malone dismounted and stepped up on the porch. Wister said, "Dirk Blair?"

The man gave a grudging, "Yes. What do you want?"

"I'm Jim Wister. Suppose we go in and light up."

The man turned and went inside, and Wister and Malone followed him. The man lit an oil lamp at the old desk where Wister's father used to keep his accounts, then sat with one leg over the desk.

Wister was standing in the middle of the room, and thus the two men sized each other up. Dirk Blair was tall, his body was heavy, but without fat. His shoulders were wide and his chest thick and covered with black hair. He was bareheaded. His eyebrows were bushy and came together over a thick high-bridged nose. His eyes were black and restless as he returned Wister's gaze.

It was Blair who spoke first. His tone was defensive.

"You didn't let me know you was coming. What's the idea; ain't I running things to suit you?"

"I don't know," Wister answered. "That's what I came to find out."

"What do you want to know?"

"For one thing, I want to know what's the trouble around here. The place has got a bad name, they tell me."

"Then ask whoever told you. I just do the best I can."

"The place hasn't made any money in the last three years," Wister said. "What's the cause of that?"

"Thievery! A man can't sell cattle unless he can keep 'em to sell."

"How many head have we got?"

"Maybe five-six hundred head of cows."

"Where's the rest of them? We used to run three thousand."

Dirk Blair sat with one leg over the corner of the desk. "Listen," he said angrily. "Everybody is against this place. Everybody wants it, and they want to weaken it before they try to take it. Ask them where the rest of the cattle are."

"Where are your books?" Wister shot at him.

"Well now," Blair said. "I never was much of a hand with a pencil. Have to keep everything in my head. So, there ain't no records." He deliberately allowed his anger to rise. "Just what is this?" he asked. "Are you trying to say you don't trust me to run the place?"

"Let's put it this way," Wister said evenly. "I'll try running it for a while and see how it goes. You can stick around as foreman."

"And work under you?" Blair asked. "No, sir! If I ain't good enough to run it, I ain't good enough to work on it."

"Suit yourself," Wister answered. "I hear a lot of talk about you, and I thought maybe you'd run out on me. Of course, if you're afraid to face it, I can understand you hightailing."

Blair scowled. "I ain't afraid of you or a dozen like you. I ain't run from nobody yet, and I ain't starting now."

"Suit yourself; stay or go. Whichever you think is safest."

"Let's get this straight," Blair raged. "I been running this place since old Wister was crippled up. When the old man died I kept on running it. I've got a heap of work tied up in this place, and I ain't got wages out of it. Now along comes these big ranchers, and you, too, and you all tell me to get out. They want this outfit; you want this outfit. Well, here's what they're saying; they're saying this used to be free range, and old Wister just came along and claimed it and held it, and they respected his right to it as long as he held it and used it. Then he died, and when he died, his claim to this range died along with him. So, now they say they've got as much right to it as he ever had.

"Well, maybe they have; but whatever right they've got, I've got still more, because I stayed here and held it together. If anybody has got a right to this range, it ain't you and it ain't Buckner nor none of them big fellers. It is Dirk Blair—me. And I'm not being dealt out of my hand."

"One little item," Wister said softly. "What about me? I inherited the place from

my father."

"You didn't inherit anything. Your dad couldn't leave you something that wasn't his. This was free range before he settled on it. When he died, it became free range again. I'm the owner now."

Jim Wister swung. Blair went over backward, clearing the table and landing on his head and shoulders on the opposite side. He came up cursing. He wiped a sleeve across his cheek and it came away carrying blood from a cut that Wister's fist opened up.

"Now you done it," he said slowly. "Now you done crossed a bridge you can't go back over. You sure hit the wrong man this time."

"You may be right," Wister said. "But I never have had a man scare me away from something that was mine, and I don't think you're going to run me out of my own home."

"Won't I?" Blair asked, and lowering his head, charged at Wister.

SURPRISED at the fury of Blair's attack, Wister was driven back before he could catch himself. He bounced his weight against the wall behind him, thus driving himself forward, sweeping Blair before him. He held the advantage of his momentum until he had driven Blair back against the flat-topped desk.

Locked together thus, they strained for the advantage.

Suddenly Blair gave way, falling over backward with a quick movement, pulling Wister over with him, and at the same time lifting his leg so that Wister sailed over him, pivoted on the man's upthrust knee.

Wister went flying clear over the table head first and came down on the stone hearth of the fireplace. The jolt knocked the wind out of him, and he lay gasping for breath a moment while Blair scuttled over the table and dived for him on the floor.

Blair landed on him, one knee on his chest, his two hands reaching for Wister's throat. Wister rolled over suddenly, barely escaping the man's grasp. He realized now the insane fury behind Blair's mad rage, and knew that he had a fight on his hands—a real fight with a man who would show no quarter.

They both got to their feet at the same time. Wister caught sight of Malone out of the corner of his eye, and saw that Malone was drawing his pistol.

"Hold it," he shouted. "I'll handle him."

Now Blair dived at Wister with his head down, and his long arms encircled Wister's waist, driving him back against the table. Wister had one elbow crooked around Blair's neck as the table collapsed under them and they went to the floor in the wreckage.

Blair tried to escape as they landed, but Wister locked the muscles in his elbow, holding the man's head in its vice. He pounded Blair in the head with the other fist; Blair managed to bury his face in Wister's chest so that the blows found only the solid bone of his skull.

Blair lifted his knees one at a time in a running motion, catching Wister in the groin, sending streams of agony flooding through his body.

Wister released his hold on Blair's neck and shoved himself out through the wreckage of the table. Blair's strong breath was hot in his face. As he slid away, Wister sent a right fist crashing into the man's nose, bringing a sudden spurt of blood.

Blair shook his head even as his hand went out instinctively and grasped Wister's shirt collar. The breath was still coming in painful gasps from Wister's tortured lungs, and the pains shooting up from his groin had not subsided.

Wister was up on his knees. As Blair jerked him forward, he reached out with both arms and caught Blair around the neck. As he fell forward he jerked Blair to him and held him so closely that Blair's cocked fist merely grazed his ear and passed on over his shoulder.

Then they were both on the floor, a pair of puffing, fighting animals intent on destroying each other. They fought with the strength of savages, fists crashing on flesh, missing their marks, clawing hands grasping for necks and hair, fingernails plowing up flesh.

Blair was a heavy-moving animal, growling curses, his mind set with a brutal intent. His iron hard fists found Wister's ribs, drove the wind out of him, knocked him on his back often, punishing him with

their bone-cracking weight.

Wister was lighter, his fists carried less weight behind them when they lashed out, but he was more agile. He took the torture that Blair meted out to him, and kept lashing back with his own stinging blows.

They were again on their feet. They came together in the middle of the room. Now they stood toe to toe and pounded each other with short vicious jabs and hooks that sank into the flesh and brought grunts from both men.

Blair ducked his head into Wister's chest and began a sudden forward march, drumming into Wister's middle with short right and left punches that worked like the drive-rods on locomotive wheels. He had his head protected from Wister's fists.

WISTER could not stop him until he himself had backed the entire width of the room and brought up with his back against the edge of the top of the kitchen table with its stack of dirty dishes and big pan of dirty dishwater.

Blair's head was still pushing against him. The continuous rain of blows to Wister's stomach had finally driven the wind out of him and paralyzed his lungs so that he could not get his breath. He was trying desperately to suck in air, and his lungs wouldn't work.

He grasped Blair by his long hair and at the same time rolled his body around out from in front of Blair. At the moment he was free, he used Blair's own forward pressure to push the man's head on forward and downward until he had Blair's whole face buried in the pan of dishwater. Wister used his other hand to give him added strength while Blair struggled to raise his head and Wister tried to fight the paralysis of his lungs by making great grasping efforts to get the air flowing again.

Blair blew bubbles in the dishwater as he struggled, and finally loosened his grip on Wister, just as Wister felt the grateful air come rushing back into his lungs again. Blair's hands, free of Wister now, went to the dishpan and jerked it off the table, dropping it to the floor, and thus escaping the water which was choking him.

Blair lifted his head, wiped the greasy water from his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

Then he opened his eyes, and just as his gaze came upon Wister, Wister doubled his fist and put every last ounce of his strength into one solid blow to the jaw.

Blair's head went up, his knees buckled and he went over backward on the table, taking it over with him. Blair and the greasy dishes landed in a heap beside the top of the overturned table, and in that instant Wister was on top of him with pounding fists.

It was dirty, it was bloody, but it was a fight that Blair, a bigger man and a dirty fighter, had started. When Wister got through with him, Blair's face was a mass of blood. His two eyes were already swollen, and his lips were as thick and red as a piece of raw beefsteak. He got up onto his knees and started crawling while Wister was still working on him, and he was crawling toward the door.

Wister did not hit him again as he crawled, but stepped over to the door and waited for him. Blair was like a rage-blinded animal who knew nothing of what he was doing. He crawled on toward the door, and was about to put one hand out the door and keep on crawling. That was when Wister spoke to him.

"That's far enough," he said. "Get up on your feet and come back here. You've had your say; now you're going to listen."

Blair turned his head and looked at him. Jim Wister got him under the arms, yanked him to his feet and shoved him heavily into a chair.

They were both exhausted with the terrific punishment they had taken. Blair sat slumped in the chair, his head hanging and his bruised mouth wide open, and his eyes gazing unseeingly at the floor.

"Now, Blair," Wister said, "I came back here to see what you were doing that gave my ranch a bad name. If you are right in saying that it's not your fault, then I won't hold it against you. But if you've been pulling anything crooked around here, and if you intend to run out on me before I discover what it is, then I'll hunt you down if I have to look behind every rock and stump in these mountains. Get on out to the bunkhouse if you're going to stick around."

Blair pulled himself to his feet, and spat blood on the floor.

"I'll be around," he said.

III

AT ABOUT the time Wister and Malone had left town for the ranch, there was a little gathering of men in the back room of one of the Oxbow saloons. Colonel Buckner was the instigator of the meeting, which included Vince Harmon, Bob Terrill, and half a dozen racnhers whose places were scattered throughout the mountains.

Buckner was a man who naturally assumed leadership anywhere he was, and it was he who took charge now. He had an aggressive way of speaking, as though he always expected antagonism and intended to head it off by becoming angry first.

"Most of you men know we've been having trouble with Circle W for several years now. Ever since old Jake Wister got hurt, his place has been going to the dogs. There's a man running it by the name of Blair that's as crooked as a snake track. We've traced stolen cattle onto his place. That range backs up to a notch in the hills, and on the other side of the notch there's a trail down toward Blanco and a couple of mining towns, an Indian agency and a railroad construction job. All of 'em use meat —our meat, if you ask me.

"In short, I'm making the charge that Circle W is a rustler hangout, and must be destroyed if we are going to have any peace and safety. We've all got stock, and we don't want it stolen."

Bob Terrill offered a suggestion. "I've missed stuff, all right. Why don't we just watch that notch, and grab off the first herd of stolen stuff that passes through it? We can catch 'em that way quicker than by trying to drive Circle W out."

Buckner acted as though every suggestion but his own was nothing short of foolish, and he let this be known by the tone of his voice.

"These mountains are twenty-five miles wide and a hundred miles long," he said, "and there's a million hiding places in 'em. How are you going to run a fine-toothed comb through that much land and comb out the lice you're looking for? And why bother? We know who they are."

Two of the ranchers in the meeting were young men named Slim Drew and Chock Lewter, a part Indian. They had adjoining ranchers, and were friends, and they were sitting together here at this meeting. It was Slim Drew who spoke for the pair.

"Chock and I were just thinking. Jim Wister has just come in from down in Texas, and he'll probably get things straightened out. Why don't we wait and give him a chance to clean up his place?"

Buckner showed his impatience. "You can't depend on a drifter like that. Blair has been running the place for him, and if he'd wanted it run different he'd have had it run different. Besides, it's too late."

"What do you mean by too late?"

"Old Jake Wister took up his land and run cattle on it, and that was all right with the rest of us. It's all public land, and he had a right to his share as long as he could make use of it. But he's dead and gone, and his son let the place go to the dogs. I say that his son hasn't got any claim to that land any longer. To my way of thinking, it reverts back to free range, and any one of us has got as much right to it as Jake Wister's son."

A silence settled over the crowd, for they all knew what the Colonel had in mind. He was the biggest rancher in the mountains; he was the most ruthless and land-hungry man among them. If they agreed that the land was open, Buckner would move in immediately and leave them out in the cold.

Bob Terrill said, "That don't seem right to me. The young fellow ought to get a chance to see if he can carry on with his father's holdings—"

"He's had his chance ever since old Jake died."

"I can't see that," Terrill argued obstinately.

"Why can't you?" Buckner roared. "You ain't any friend of his."

Terrill's jaw went hard and his old gray eyes snapped. "What I think of him for a son-in-law, and whether I help steal his land, are two different things."

Buckner's face turned red. "It ain't stealing to drive a bunch of rustlers off public land and put that land to good use."

"I reckon it all depends on the purpose behind our self-righteous anger at them rustlers," Terrill answered dryly.

Buckner snorted. "You've always got some kind of corral-fence philosophy to spout off when you don't like to face a fact, Bob. You ain't a man that's lived so's to

have a right to get squeamish all of a sudden in your old age."

"Just wanted to be fair," Terrill answered placidly. "The point is, if you want Wister's land, why don't you say so? Why beat around the bush about being hurt by rustlers?"

"Who says I want Wister's land?" Buckner snapped. "If I wanted it, I'd go and buy him out, wouldn't I?"

"That," Terrill answered, "is what they call a moot question."

Buckner blew out his breath in a great draft. "Terrill," he said, "You're supposed to be a responsible citizen. And here instead of joining your neighbors in protecting ourselves, it sounds like you're siding against us."

"No, not against anybody," Terrill answered. "Just like to be sure I'm right before I make a move."

"Well, you'd better make up your mind before it's too late," Buckner roared. "Them that ain't with us is against us."

"I ain't with you yet," Terrill said flatly. "And whether I come in with you depends on how things go." He left the room in a dead silence.

THAT broke up the meeting. After the rest of them had left, Colonel Buckner nodded to Vince Harmon, and Harmon followed him out into the street.

"This young Wister," Buckner said. "You've known him quite a while, you say. What's he like?"

"Like a bulldog."

"I thought so. Well, he'll probably be riding out to his place tomorrow morning early, and he might take a notion to get rid of Dirk Blair and his crew. I want Blair to stay there for the present. So, here's what you might do. Blair has got his own ideas about holding that land for himself. We won't discourage him thinking that for the present. Now if you went out and warned Blair that Wister was coming out there to chase him off, you probably wouldn't have any trouble in convincing Blair that it would be to his interest to see that something happened to Wister. Particularly if you told him that I'd back him up if there was any trouble."

"That's the same as back-shooting him."

"No, it's not. If Blair shoots him, he's doing it for his own gain. That's not on our conscience. Anyhow, you do what I tell you."

"All right," Harmon answered. "I'll tell him."

Harmon reached Wister's ranch after the fight.

He called out as he dismounted, and then went and stepped into the room. It was not until he was standing in the light that he saw that it was Wister instead of Blair inside. He had a moment's trouble adjusting himself to the surprise.

Wister's face showed the marks of his fight, but he had a smile for Vince Harmon. They had ridden and hunted together as boys, along with Ed Malone, and frequently with Slim Drew and Chock Lewter. They had all grown up together, and they knew each other pretty well.

"Well," Wister said, "I'm glad to see you. I had something on my mind."

Harmon was glad for the extra time to get himself together. "What's on your mind?"

"About this afternoon. I suppose I was a little short with you when you were trying to thank me for stopping that team. Fact is, I was upset about something else. I just wanted to say that I was sorry for being a sorehead, and to congratulate you and Martha. She's a wonderful girl, and you're a lucky guy. You've got my best wishes."

Harmon smiled his relief. "Oh, that! Forget it," he said, "and thanks a lot. I didn't think a thing about it." And then, dismissing the subject abruptly, he asked, "Whose horse have you been waltzing with?"

"My foreman has just welcomed me home."

"All set now?" Harmon asked casually. "You going to live together in peace and happiness from now on?"

"That depends on Blair," Wister said. "He's out in the bunkhouse trying to make up his mind. Sit down and tell me what brings you out here in the middle of the night."

"I thought I might find you out here," he said, "and I just wanted to give you a tip. You'd better watch Blair."

"You're telling me that?" Wister asked. "One look at him, and I knew it."

"Well, I just wanted to make sure you were on your guard. Don't let him behind your back. He's made his brag that he'd run this place for four years, and that it was his by rights."

"Yeah. He told me that, but he hasn't convinced me."

"That was all I had in mind," Harmon said. "It's a long way home, so how about me bunking up in your bunkhouse tonight?"

"Bunk up right in here," Wister said. "We're turning in now."

"No, you haven't got an extra bunk. There's plenty in the bunkhouse. I'll turn in out there. That way, I can keep an eye on Blair for you tonight. It'll help some."

"Suit yourself," Wister said, "but have some coffee."

"Nope. I'm worn out. Think I'll hit the hay." He got up. "I'll probably pull out early in the morning, so don't expect me for breakfast. But thanks just the same. See you later, Jim."

He went out and they heard him lead his horse around the house toward the corral.

Malone sat silently a moment, his hands and eyes busy with a cigarette. Then he looked queerly at Wister, and shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "I just don't know."

"Don't know what?"

Malone waved his thumb toward the rear, indicating the direction Harmon had taken.

"I just can't figure it, but that don't add up, somehow. How'd he know he'd find you here?"

Wister shrugged. "Just took a chance, I guess. Vince is all right. After all, we've known him a long time."

Malone shrugged. He knew that Wister's loyalties ran deep, and that it was no use in trying to make him suspicious of a man he trusted.

AFTER leaving Wister, Vince Harmon went into the bunkhouse.

Dirk Blair was washing his swollen face before the fly-specked mirror. Tush Hog Terry, Squatty Marble and a couple of other riders were back at the far end of the room in a card game.

Blair looked up at Harmon, as though he were angry at anybody who saw him in his beat-up condition. Harmon acted as though he did not see the marks on Blair's face. He went over to him and said in an undertone, "Want to see you out by the corral in a minute."

He sat on the corral fence until Blair put in his appearance.

Blair was in an ill humor. "What'd you show up here for? Wister's here, and he'll be wondering what you're hanging around for."

"Keep your breeches on," Harmon said. "I saw him already. I wasn't expecting him to get out here so soon, but I covered myself. Told him Buckner was digging a pit for him, and that I came to warn him."

"I can't see any advantage in tipping him off that there's anybody after him. It'll only put him on his guard."

"Sure. But he knows it already, and me telling him that will put him on his guard against the wrong people. While he's got his eyes on Buckner, then you can do your stuff."

"Is that what you came to tell me?"

"In a way, but it's got to be untangled. First, Buckner is declaring open war on Wister. He doesn't want to give Wister a chance to get set. He sent me to tell you to watch your chance and see that something happens to him right quick."

Blair's cold laugh was more of a growl. "Ain't Buckner the smart boy, though? I'm supposed to take care of Wister for him, and then get a bullet in my gut for my trouble. Yes, sir. Great old gentleman, the Colonel."

"You take it easy," Harmon cautioned. "Let the Colonel think you're playing his game for him. We can play along with him as long as he thinks he's going to use us to get that land. Once we've got things like we want them, then we can take over the place. You got his orders to do away with Wister, so you can do that, and the Colonel will get the blame."

"But I'm not going to kill Wister just yet," Blair said firmly. "I could kill him any time I wanted to, but I'm not going to do it now."

"Why?" Harmon demanded. "That's what the Colonel wants."

"To hell with Buckner! I can think as well as he can. Wister knows that Buckner

is after him. So, like you say, he'll lock horns with Buckner. I'll play along with him for a while until he weakens Buckner some."

"What do you want Buckner weakened first for?"

"Because, if I got rid of Wister now, I'd have to fight it out alone with Buckner later. If I let Wister fight Buckner for a while, I'll have a weaker Buckner to face. Or no Buckner at all."

"You're getting things pretty tangled up, if you ask me."

"No, I'm not. You tell Buckner that I'm going to play along with Wister until I find out what his plans are, and then I'll get in touch with him. Wister has got friends around here, and it won't do to just go gunning for him openly."

"I'll tell Buckner what you said."

"Do that," Blair answered. "And tell him that if he see me with Wister, not to open up his mouth."

"Sounds all right, except for one thing," Harmon said. "Buckner doesn't like the idea of anybody doing any thinking except himself."

"That is a sad state of affairs," Blair said caustically, "but Colonel Buckner is going to have to chafe under them whether he likes them or not."

Harmon said, "I don't know whether I like that."

"What's it to you?" Blair snapped. "I'm the one that's doing the work, ain't I?"

"Maybe," Harmon admitted. "But it was my idea of you and me playing along with Buckner and taking over the place for ourselves."

"All you do is sit back and play innocent and double-cross anybody that'll listen to you. I'm the one that's got to show his hand and do the fighting and take all the risks. You do practically nothing."

Harmon tried to laugh him out of this attitude. "More'n that, Blair. More'n that. I'm the planner. What can you do without plans, and without knowledge of what the other side is up to? You couldn't swing it without me, and I couldn't swing it without you."

"And maybe both of us will be swinging from the top of a sycamore tree," Blair growled.

Harmon slid off the fence. "Don't worry," he said, assuringly. "Nothing will go wrong. I'm going back to town. When Wister looks for me in the morning, tell him I slept till just before daylight, then left!"

WISTER and Malone got up at the break of day and went into the bunkhouse where a lean and shaggy-haired youth of about twenty was cooking hotcakes on the stove in the corner.

Blair was combing his hair in front of the glass and examining the marks of the fight on his face. Two more men were sitting at the table drinking coffee from tin cups.

"What's your name?" Wister asked the nearest.

"Terry," the man answered, barely removing the cup from his mouth.

Malone said, "Howdy, Tush Hog."

Terry did not return the greeting. He was a big thick man whose nose turned up so sharply at the point that a man standing before him could look into his nostrils, and the lift of his nose raised his upper lip back over his gums, exposing two long yellow upper canine teeth with an empty space between them where the four upper incisors were missing. The remaining teeth suggested the elongated tusks of a hog.

"I'm Wister," Jim said shortly. "I'll be in charge from now on. You staying or going?"

"Am I fired?"

"No. Not now."

"Then I'll stay till I'm ready to go."

"Suit yourself." Wister turned to the other man. "Squatty Something-or-other, I guess?"

"Squatty Marble, and when I take a notion to go, I'll ask for my time."

"Fair enough," Wister answered. "Who's the kid?"

The youngish fellow turned around from the stove, holding a frying pan in his hand and trying to look mean.

"My name is Bud Willow, and I don't know whether I'll like it around here or not."

"I don't know whether I want you around or not," Wister answered evenly. "It might get a little rough, so you'd better pull out while it's safe."

The youth slapped the skillet down an-

grily on the stove. "When I work for a brand I work for it, and it don't get too rough for me. It ain't that I'm thinking about."

"If you've got any squawks, let's hear 'em," Wister said. "Otherwise, go on with your cooking."

Blair came from the washstand and mirror and started to sit at the head of the table.

Wister saw his intention, waited until he had sat down, then stepped over to him. He felt the air of expectancy about the room as the men watched to see whether Blair would get away with this gesture of defiance of Wister's authority since the top man is commonly accorded the place at the head of the table.

Wister reached out and caught Blair by the collar and yanked him back to his feet.

"You're in the wrong place," he said. "Did you forget?"

He held his position while he saw the rage run through Blair, and while Blair threshed out with himself whether or not to fight. Blair decided against it, and sat down at the far end.

They ate a while, then Wister said, "We'll ride out this morning, Blair, and have a look at our stuff. According to what you say, we've lost most of the herd. Have you got any idea where it might have gone?"

"I told you before, it's been rustled."

"They call this a rustler's outfit. Have you been rustling any cattle?"

"That's putting it kind of blunt, ain't it?"

"Have you?"

"No, I haven't. It's all I've been able to do to try to take care of what we've got."

"And you didn't do a very good job at that."

"I didn't have the money to hire a full crew."

"You should have been able to make enough money to operate on, at least. Cattle have been bringing a good price for five years now without a break."

"Well, we've got what we've got, and the rest is gone. Find 'em if you can."

"That's what I intend to do. We'll ride out and have a look after breakfast."

"*You'll* ride out after breakfast," Blair said. "I'm not making a fool out of myself by begging for somebody to gun me down."

Wister surveyed him contemptuously across the table.

"I was just wondering," he said. "They told me you were a fighter. How'd you manage to fool 'em?"

"Damn you!" Blair said, "You're going to ride me once too often. I told you the whole neighborhood is gunning for us. They claim we're outlaw; they claim that every head of stock we've got is maverick on that account, and belongs to anybody that'll take it. You think we could go out and take it back against that much odds? You're a fool!"

Wister looked at him speculatively.

"There are two ways to look at that," he mused. "They could have taken it—or you could have sold it. In that case, you wouldn't want to be trying to take it back at gunpoint, would you, Dirk?"

"Damn you to hell!" Blair growled. "I'll go along. Maybe I'll get to see you get your ears knocked down."

Wister grinned at him, then looked at the others.

"Think it's going to be too hot today for a little riding, or would you like to go along and enjoy the scenery?"

Tush Hog Terry returned his look brazenly.

"You roar and the mountains tremble," he said. "This is something I want to see. Squatty and me will pull up our chairs and see what happens."

"I don't know what I'll find," Wister said, "but if I find anything that don't look right, things could happen. You might want to be sure that the prospect doesn't bother you too much."

"The prospect of a fight never bothered me so much as the prospect of not having a fight," Tush Hog said. "But the sight of a man talking fight and then not producing it bothers me still more. I wouldn't want you to be leading me on no snipe hunt. It's too hot a weather for that."

Wister said, "I don't waste my time hunting snipe. I only hunt when I have to, and when I do, I go about it in the quickest way to get it over."

"That is easy said," Tush Hog answered. "I'll be along when the time comes to quit talking and go to shooting."

"That's all I want," Wister said.

IV

THEY rode out shortly after sunup. It was one of those clear days that start off cool, with clean crisp air which will soon grow hot and sultry.

They followed trails down through high grass, crossed the creek, a stream of clear cold water pouring down out of the higher reaches of the mountains, crossed more of the grass bowl, and started climbing over the rimrock ridge that separated Circle W from the adjacent valley.

"I wouldn't go any farther, was I you," Dirk Blair said, riding up beside Wister. "Get over there and you're subject to bein' shot on sight. We've had our warnings."

Wister said, "Yes? Last time I was over this way, that valley was owned by an old timer named Harris. He was right friendly. What's the matter with him now?"

"He's in his grave now," Blair said. "That is part of Colonel Buckner's B Bar B, and he don't allow any riding on his grass."

Wister said, "This is free range. It is not owned, but used by whoever makes use of it. I've got cows missing, and I'm going to look wherever there might be a chance of me finding them."

"I'm just telling you the law that Buckner has laid down."

"If you're afraid, go back."

Blair flared up. "What's the idea of always hinting I'm afraid?"

"What's the idea of always being afraid I'll call you a coward?" Wister returned.

"I don't even know how to spell the word," Blair snapped.

They passed over the crest of the ridge, dropping down through a light growth of postoak and hickory, and coming down to the ford of a stream which ran along the foot of the ridge on the far side. This would be the beginning of the range Buckner claimed.

Stopping to let their horses drink, Wister noted that the three riders from the ranch were not at their ease, but kept alert eyes wandering toward places from which bullets could start flying.

They finished watering their horses and struck out, passing out of the woods surrounding the creek and riding across a broad flat piece of grass that came up to their horses' knees. There were more cattle on this side of the natural divide, and Wister headed among them, reading brands without slowing down the pace of his animal.

Ed Malone had a quiet way of making his observations. "Pretty spot Buckner has got for ranch quarters, ain't it?" He dipped his head in the direction of a rise some four miles ahead. "Nice big house up on a hillside, so's he can take a pair of glasses and see practically every inch of your range."

Wister grinned at him. "Yeah. I reckon he's had his eyes on us from the minute we came out of the woods. So what do we do, turn and run?"

"I doubt if it would do any good," Malone said easily. "They're already out here waiting for us. Probably have rifles lined on us now."

Malone pointed to the grass on the left. It was belly-high to their horses. "That grass had been ridden through not more than two hours ago. See how it's still about half bent over? Makes a direct trail to that bunch of timber over there."

Wister, whose mind had been on other things, had not noticed the tell-tale sign of the passage of horses. He caught a glimpse of the tightness that came to the faces of Blair and Tush Hog and Squatty, then gave his attention to the clump of woods which Malone had pointed out. It was a full half-mile farther on.

"We'll go right along with our work," he said. "Buckner has no right to keep us from looking for strays."

"You're a bigger fool than I thought," Blair growled.

"We're going to scratch through this piece of range and comb out anything we might see that belongs to us. If there's nothing of ours, that's fine. If there is, then we'll take it."

They had not stopped their horses, but had continued riding straight ahead toward a scattering of white-faced yearlings which had attracted Wister's attention. As they came among the grazing animals, Wister pulled his horse up to a stop and stood up in his stirrups so that he could see farther around the bunch.

All the yearlings whose right sides he could see wore two brands. On the hip was his own round-sided W in a circle, the

Circle W brand. This brand was vented with an X iron, and Buckner's peculiar brand was on the shoulder. Buckner's brand was a reversed B with a bar tying it to a regular B.

Blair and his group pulled up behind him and sat their saddles silently while he examined this bunch of perhaps a dozen yearlings. Malone, on the other hand, took one good look at them and then moved his horse off at a rapid pace to the left, the direction opposite that of the clump of woods toward which the tracks of the earlier horsemen had led.

Wister turned to Blair and said, "That's our stuff, wouldn't you say?"

"It's got our brand vented on it, all right," Blair answered.

"Don't you know the conformation of our stuff? Does it look like stock you've branded?"

"Yep."

"Did you sell it to Buckner?"

Blair cursed. "I told you that I never sold Buckner a cow in my life."

"In that case," Wister said calmly, "The cattle is still ours. Round it up, boys, and start it back over the ridge."

MALONE had ridden out about half a quarter, and now he came back at a fast lope. He pulled up alongside Wister.

"Jim," he said, "this is a trap."

"What do you mean?"

"I followed that horse trail back there. Those yearlings were planted here. Those men drove 'em down here when they came, probably just before daylight. They left them here and hit for that woods. They're probably there now, watching us and hoping we start driving this stock."

Blair and his men stopped their horses while Wister pondered this, waiting his decision.

After a moment's thought, Wister said, "I see. Buckner figures I might be milling around here looking for something, so he sends out something for me to find. I find it, and he finds me, and that brings things to a head, short and sweet."

"I told you Buckner don't fool," Blair said. "Now we're in a hole for sure. Well, mister, how do we get out of this one?"

"We'll do just what I said we'd do," Wister answered. "We came looking for strays, and we found some. We'll drive 'em home. And if anybody tries to lay a gun on us, we'll give him a direct answer. Is that all right with you? Or is there some reason why you'd rather not lay your gun on the Buckner outfit?"

"You're sure running up a big bill you'll have to settle some day," Blair answered. "If you live till I get around to collecting it."

"If you fight Buckner as well as you threaten me," Wister answered, "that'll satisfy me. Now go round up those yearlings and start 'em toward home."

"With that woods full of guns?"

"With that woods full of guns! Afraid?"

"You go to hell!" Blair answered, and moved his horse toward the herd.

They circled the loose bunch of yearlings and got them on the move toward the rise in a matter of a few minutes. They tied the stuff together in a tight little knot and got it strung out. Wister got ahead of the string a little piece, and checked it as it passed him.

Then he suddenly threw up his hand, and yelled at Terry. "There's a sleeper in there. One of those calves hasn't got our brand on it. Cut it out of the herd and turn it back."

Tush Hog and Squatty found the calf and cut it out, chousing it back away from the herd which it naturally tried to follow.

Malone came up and shook his head. "That was a close one, wasn't it?"

"Yeah!" Wister answered. "The Colonel would have given an eye-tooth to have had us try to drive that calf of his off his range."

"It would have been worth your life," Malone agreed. "Well, here's your neighbors."

Wister turned and saw half a dozen riders pouring out of the woods to which Malone had traced the faint tracks in the grass.

He pushed his horse up to the head of the line of yearlings, where Blair was riding point.

"Keep moving this stock," he ordered. "Don't wait to join in the palaver, but drop back behind the herd and keep it moving. And don't pull a gun unless you see me shooting. Understand that?"

Blair shrugged. "I told you we wouldn't get away with it."

"You see our brand on this stuff, don't you?"

"Buckner considers our brand open for the taking."

"The Colonel and I don't see eye to eye on that," Wister answered dryly, and halted his horse until the others had caught up with him. "You men stand fast here with me while Blair goes on with the stuff," he said. He gave Tush Hog Terry a sharp scrutiny. "You're the boy who likes a fight," he added. "Well, I can't promise you one. Keep your gun pouched unless I draw mine. But if I do draw mine, then get busy showing me how well you like a fight."

Wister had three men beside him. Malone was all right. Tush Hog and Squatty were unknown quantities. He stood his ground, turning his horse to face the approaching riders, and here he waited.

The riders closed up the distance between them quickly. Wister recognized Buckner in the lead, and beside him another big man, younger and taller than Buckner, but not so thick through the middle. The man sat his horse like the Colonel, and had his same general build except for the excess weight on the older man.

"Who might that be?" Wister asked.

"That's Rube Buckner, the Colonel's son," Malone answered, "And a chip off the old blockhead. He's his old man's foreman."

The other four men with the Buckners rode behind the pair. Buckner pulled his horse up to a stop no more than twenty feet from Wister, and his own men spread out on either side of him. Wister had both hands on his saddle horn, a cigarette between the fingers of his right hand.

Buckner had been shouting at him from some distance back, but Wister could not make out his words above the thunder of the hoofbeats. He had seen Buckner's hat lifted in a signal for him to stop his drive, but this he had ignored.

Now the Colonel stood in his stirrups, red-faced and perspiring.

"What are you doing with that stock?"

"Driving it home," Wister answered evenly.

"It ain't yours to drive off. Tell the man to turn it loose."

"The stock has my brand on it," Wister answered quietly, "and I'll pick up my stock wherever I see it."

"Didn't you see my brand on it?" the Colonel shouted.

"Did you?" Wister answered. "You must have good eyesight if you can read a brand from up there in the woods."

"My brand is on that stuff. Your brand is vented out. I bought that stuff. You turn it loose."

"Get your bill of sale?"

"I don't need one."

"You do as far as I'm concerned."

The Colonel answered, "I am not arguing with you. There ain't no Circle W brand operating here anymore, and any man driving a cow off my land is a rustler. All right, you! Lift your hands and ride up to me. One at a time, now. You first, Wister. I'll show you how we treat thieves on this range!"

THERE were half a dozen men in Buckner's little group, and they had the attitudes of judges on the bench. They had caught men driving off their cattle, and they were prepared to judge them, sentence them, and execute their sentences.

Wister sat facing them on his own horse, his two hands resting easily on his saddle horn, taking an occasional puff of his cigarette, measuring these men before him, weighing the chances of his own men behind him sticking with him. These were enemies before him, and behind him Blair was an enemy. He had no men to back him up, though his little group was in a position in which they were supposed to do it. Unless—Wister suddenly realized—they were in on the setting of this trap, and were here to help spring it.

Buckner called out impatiently. "I said for you to ride up here, Wister, with your hands in sight. Move!"

Wister sat easily, except for the fact that his legs were straightened out so that his feet pushed his stirrups outward, revealing the tautness in him. The morning sun slashed down at an angle across his hat brim making a sharp plane along the side of his cheek, giving the effect of a face that was all sharp angles and flat surfaces instead of rounded curves, suggesting a hardness that otherwise might have been missed by the onlooker.

Wister blew out a long whiff of smoke, making a smoke ring and then blowing it

apart, and then he gave Buckner his drawling answer.

"I think, mister, that you've built a trap and then fallen back into it yourself. This stuff wears my brand and yours. You either put both brands on it, which I doubt, or you bought it from Blair and he didn't record the sale, which is a possibility. Or you just simply took it on yourself to call my brand open, and rebranded this stock of mine. It doesn't matter much to me which you did. It's just a technicality, anyway. But, this is my stock, and I'm taking it home. And when I get it home, I'm coming back and look for more of my cattle on your range, and drive it away. And I'm going to keep on doing that until I've looked over your entire herd and taken back every calf or cow that's mine. Do you understand that, Buckner?"

Colonel Buckner's face turned crimson under its tan, and the anger in him choked him so that his voice was a high-pitched screech.

"Ride up here, man, before we open up on you! And don't give me no more of your talk!"

Wister said patiently, "Old man, you're begging for more trouble than you ever heard of before. You've bluffed your way ever since you've been in these parts, but you don't bluff me. Do you know what it is to fight a range war? Do you think you've got the stomach for that kind of thing?"

Buckner's ears were deaf to argument; his senses reeled with his rage at hearing a man defy him.

"Talk!" he exclaimed. "Who are you to come in here and claim land that went back to public domain three-four years ago? You come in and claim a rustler's nest that's been eating away at us for years, and expect us to respect your claim. That stuff you're driving out of here right now—suppose it has your brand on it? It's stuff that Blair stole from me, stuff that I took back because it's my rightful property in the first place. You've got no claim to it."

"Now," Wister said, "you're changing your story. First, you bought it. Now, Blair stole it and you merely took it back. You got any more versions of it handy? Just which one of your stories is the truth?"

"Never mind," Buckner exploded. "Enough of this talk. Ride up with your hands out in the open."

Wister said with a touch of resignation in his voice, "Buckner, I've tried to keep you from making a fool of yourself. We're taking those yearlings home, and you'd better do some thinking before you interfere. You've got five men with you, but if you move another foot against me, I'm going to open up on you. Not on your men—but on you! Do you think that all five of them can keep me from putting a bullet in your guts? They might kill me after I do it, but can they keep me from puncturing that fat gut of yours? Can you keep me from doing it?"

"I'll show you—"

"Are you sure?" Wister answered softly. "You've got a lot of meat on your muscles. Can you draw a gun quicker than I can? Are you sure you can? Have you got any proof that you're faster with a gun than I am? Are you sure that your flabby arm is faster than mine? Are you sure you can stand the feel of a forty-five slug plowing through your guts? Do you want to risk finding out?"

It was Colonel Buckner's son Rube who spoke.

"What are we waiting for, Colonel? Let's blow that bum to hell and be done with it."

Wister's eyes went lazily to Rube Buckner.

"YOUR dad is waiting to find out whether he can kill me without getting a bullet in his guts. And he's got sense enough to realize that the odds are against it. Maybe this hadn't occurred to you, son, but a man's got a whole tub full of entrails. And when a bullet goes through a man's guts, it probably drills a dozen or more holes through sections of them. No doctor in the world can patch up all those holes. And so peritonitis sets in, and a man's guts burn like fire. And finally the poison makes him die in agony. But slow! Maybe your old man knows those things, and maybe he's already convinced that if any one of you boys so much as lift a gun out of its pouch, that's the thing that's going to happen to him. Maybe that's why your old man is not going to stop me. Ask him."

Wister turned his gaze back to the face of Colonel Buckner, and he could read the transformation that was going on in the man. He saw the look of triumph fade from

the red features, and doubt replaced. Wister had laid bare his weakness.

The men behind him sensed this change in him, and somehow knowing that the Colonel himself did not dare go against Wister, their own assurance left them uncomfortable and afraid.

Young Rube Buckner was one of those who sensed this. He had the instinct to try to save the Buckner face. He pulled his horse slightly away from that of his father.

"I'll tell you, Wister," he said. "You're new around here, and maybe you don't know how much we've had to put up with from Circle W. I'll admit those yearlings have got your brand vented on them. Maybe they once belonged to Circle W, but you can understand that we feel that they were originally stolen from us. I'll tell you what we'll do, we'll give you a chance to find out what kind of a crew you've got. You can take that stock along, provided you get to work right off and do something about the thieves that have been working from behind your brand. We'll expect you to start making restitution right away, as soon as you've found out what's what around here. If you don't, we'll have to move against you."

He turned back to his father. "All right, Colonel, we'll give him this chance, and if he doesn't clean up that mess over at his place, we won't give him the second one. Let's go."

The old man made an instinctive gesture; he pounded his saddle horn wordlessly with his fist, then jerked his horse's head up viciously and spun him around. His group fell in behind him as he rode back toward his own ranch quarters.

Wister did not move his horse until the men got out of pistol range.

Tush Hog Terry swore an oath. "Why, that big bag of wind," he exploded. "He's had these here hills fooled all the time. I never allowed to see him tuck his tail in and back down on a bluff he made."

"Did you ever see anybody call his hand on any of his bluffs?"

"Come to think of it, no," Tush Hog answered. "They just allowed he was as hard as he acted like he was, I reckon."

Wister rolled a smoke. "It goes to show that people just about take a man at the value he puts on himself," he said. "He puts his own price tag on himself, and people accept it as his true value. So the people get fooled."

V

RUBY BUCKNER was a law unto herself. Nearing twenty, having the wild beauty of an unbroken thoroughbred colt, and spoiled by never having had a rein which could control her, she was about the only person in the world who could dare to stand up to her father.

Ruby was built like a cowboy's dream of loveliness. She was poised, independent, and with that air of feminine helplessness which made any man want to guard her against the hardness of life. Her hair was a shining blue-black which reflected the rays of the sun in sparkling brilliance as she moved her small shapely head and looked out upon a world of wickedness through large innocent eyes.

She was sitting on the shaded veranda of the ranch house a little while after the Colonel and Rube left. She had a pair of binoculars in her lap, and at intervals she had swept the range with them, watching for signs of her father's party. She had finally seen the meeting and the parley, and she was puzzled when she saw the Colonel and his men turn their horses and ride away from the little group driving the cattle back over the ridge.

Her father's party finally pulled through the front yard, where the old man turned his horse over to one of the men and came up onto the front porch and sat down wearily, his face red and sweating. She knew by her father's posture, and by the way the men had ridden in that something was wrong.

"Well, Colonel," she asked as the old man dropped into a chair on the porch, "did you punish the rustlers?"

"Shut up!" the Colonel snapped. Ruby got up and went into the house. She went on through the great cool rooms and out the back door. She found her brother just returning from the corral.

"What's the matter with the Colonel?" she asked. "He looked like he had felt of a hibernating bear to see if he was fat enough to butcher, and the bear wasn't hibernating at all."

"That was just about it," Rube said. "He went out to find a bear to eat, and the bear would have eaten the seat of his pants out instead, if I hadn't pulled him out of the mess."

"What happened?" the girl asked with a rising interest.

"This young Wister; he don't seem to like the idea of the Colonel pushing him around, so I gather."

"Fancy that!" the girl said mockingly. "Imagine anybody objecting to the Colonel pushing them around! What's this world coming to, anyway?"

"That's what the Colonel is asking himself right now," Rube answered. "It came as an awful shock to him. He won't get over it soon."

"I'd hate to be in this fellow Wister's shoes," the girl observed.

"I don't know," Rube answered speculatively. "I've got a hunch that Wister can wear his own boots without help. And if I'm right, the old man is due to get jolted up some more before it's over."

"So what's the Colonel going to do about it?"

"He don't know, yet. He has just learned that he is afraid to face a bullet. He has spent so many years rounding out that stomach of his that it has become very precious to him. He doesn't want it all shot up."

"And then he'll call his dogs, and go over and wipe Mr. Wister clear off the map," the girl prophesied.

"He'll want to do that, but whether he will do it is a white horse of a different color. You see, this Wister seems to hold the idea that if the Colonel is the man making the trouble, then it is the Colonel that he should go after. That don't set so well with the Colonel. Now if Wister would only be reasonable and shoot back at one of the hired hands, instead of the Colonel, the Colonel wouldn't mind. But for Wister to try to come back at him personally, well, he can't understand that kind of thinking in a man."

"That is a crushing blow to his dignity," the girl answered. "There ought to be a law! Who ever heard of the man starting a war being expected to actually fight it? What's the world coming to?"

She started to turn and go back to the house when Rube stopped her.

"Listen here, Innocence," he said, "you were asking me for some money last week, and I didn't have it. I maybe can fix you up with a hundred dollars or so in a few days." He put on a smile which, when he had occasion to use it, he could make very engaging. "That is, if you could kind of give me a hand on a little deal."

"What have I got to do to get it?" she asked, suspiciously. "Rob a bank?"

"Nothing much. Just keep Wister entertained for me for a little while Saturday night. Get a date with him."

"Well, now, isn't that the cutest idea? What am I? A Delilah to make love to him while you knife him in the back or something? A man that can face the Colonel down, I might turn out to like."

"It's not that bad," Rube said. "But he's milling around these mountains too much all of a sudden. I just don't happen to want him to be milling around Saturday night. Now if you could kind of bump into him beforehand, and manage to get along with him so you just happened to have a date with him to go riding Saturday night—"

"So he won't happen to bump into that herd of Circle W cattle that happens to be grazing in that box canyon up by Indian-ear Greer's cabin? Is that it?"

"What herd?"

"Don't be a fool," the girl answered. "I get around these hills, and I know that there's forty or fifty head of that Circle W stuff hidden up there. All waiting to be pushed over the notch to Blanco, was my guess when I saw them. So they're yours, are they? Let's see, fifty head at, say twenty-five dollars a head would be twelve hundred—"

"Hold it," the brother said, "those cows are not all mine."

"What's that got to do with it?" she answered lightly. "They're the Colonel's. He claims everything with a Circle W brand on it, doesn't he? Or intends to get it. It's all the same. You'd only be stealing from the Colonel in the long run, and that doesn't count."

"I mean there's somebody else—"

"Don't try to tell me that. You wouldn't share that kind of money with anybody—except me."

"You're a damned blackmailer," Rube snapped "You'll get a hundred dollars and not a cent more, and you won't get that if you don't keep Wister busy Saturday night."

"What are you suddenly afraid of him for?"

"I want to get that stock out of there before he runs across it."

"So you've turned rustler."

"You're a damned liar! You know that stuff is open to anybody's brand, and if I just happen to beat the old man to it, then it's mine instead of his. And he doesn't have to know a thing about it."

"But Saturday night," the girl objected. "I was expecting you to take me to the dance."

"That's why I picked that night. I'll take you to the dance in the buggy, but then I want you to keep Wister occupied. I'll be at the dance—long enough to be seen, anyway—and then I'll be gone. Your job is to get Wister to go to the dance and keep him busy for as long as you can after the dance starts. And you've got the attractions it takes to keep him interested for a long time."

"You skunk," she answered. "So you'd sell your loving sister's virtue for a herd of yearlings!"

"Yearlings are worth money," Rube answered. "And you haven't had any virtue since you started hanging out with Vince Harmon. Now go take a ride for yourself and accidentally bump into Wister."

"All right, I'll sacrifice myself for my loving brother."

"You'll do it for that hundred loving dollars," Rube answered. "And nothing else."

WISTER and his group came upon Ruby Buckner seated on a log beside a wooded trail. One of her boots lay beside her on the ground, and she was rubbing her ankle. Wister stopped his horse.

The girl glanced up with a startled look on her face. She picked up her boot in a confused gesture and put it on her foot gingerly.

"Oh, hello," she smiled. "Who are you?"

"Wister is the name."

"Oh," she said in a tone that suggested mixed emotions. "I'm Ruby Buckner. I wasn't expecting to see strangers on our place."

"Just riding through," Wister said. "We'll be off your land very soon."

"No, I didn't mean it that way. I'm glad you happened along."

Wister looked puzzled.

"My horse just threw me," she said. "I'm ashamed of myself for letting him do it. I am not that poor a horsewoman, but he caught me unawares." She rubbed her ankle under the doeskin boot. "I'd have tried to catch him, but I sprained my ankle when I fell. I wonder if one of your men could catch him for me?"

"Glad to," Wister said, and turned to Blair. "Try to find Miss Buckner's horse, will you?"

Blair threw him a dirty look, and he and Tush Hog and Squatty turned their animals into the woods.

The girl said, "I'm afraid I can't stand on this ankle—"

Wister slid off his horse. "Stay where you are till we find the horse," he said. "We'll get you going. If that ankle is badly sprained, you'd better get the boot off before it swells so much that you'll have to cut it off. I'll help you with it."

"No," she said quickly, "it isn't that bad. I'm just afraid it will get worse if I try to walk on it."

"Then you'd better not try," Wister said. "Just take it easy."

Malone had been rolling a cigarette. He lit it, put the match out against his levis and then turned and pushed his horse into the woods, not having said anything.

The girl looked after him, and then at Wister who was now standing beside her. She spoke in a low voice.

"I'd like to talk to you alone after they get my horse," she said. "I had intended trying to get to see you some time later. But now would be a good time."

There was a sound in the trees and Malone came in leading the paint horse. "He was grazing up at the spring," Malone said.

The girl was profuse in her thanks.

"Not at all," Wister assured her. Then he spoke to Malone. "I wonder if you'd mind taking Blair and the boys and looking in that pocket over to the east, and then hitting for home. That'll be about enough

riding for today."

Malone's eyes were anywhere and everywhere except on Wister and the girl.

"Sure," he said. "See you at supper." Then he went off to pick up the others.

Malone went away puzzled by what he had seen. Natural woodsman that he was, he had been unconsciously studying the ground as he rolled his smoke, and it was then that he had seen the tracks of the girl's horse leading up toward the spring.

He had studied them, and he saw no evidence of the horse having thrown her. It was then that he had set off following the tracks, and in the damp ground around the spring he had seen the tracks of the girl where she had dismounted and started walking back toward the fallen tree at the trail. He had simply picked up the horse at the spring and followed the girl's footsteps back to the tree where she sat.

Ruby Buckner was up to something.

RUBY made no gesture to leave. Instead, she gave Wister a long searching look, frank and appraising, and yet revealing none of her own thoughts. She was surprised at what she saw in Wister, and more surprised at the effect it had on her.

Wister was a tall man with broad shoulders and the deeply tanned skin of a man whose days were spent in the sun. There were small crows' feet around the corners of his eyes from too much looking across broad stretches of land. He was lean and saddle hard, and his face was not handsome, but strong, with flat planes and sharp angles around his cheeks and his chin.

"I wanted to talk with you for a moment or two," she said. "About—well, about our ranches."

Wister lit his cigarette and carefully put out the match before dropping it.

"Maybe you don't understand," he said. "But your father and I are in a disagreement. As a matter of fact we had a little trouble this morning."

"I know it. That's why I wanted to see you."

"You still don't understand," Wister said. "He is out to get me. You see what kind of a position that puts me in? I'm sure you wouldn't have anything to say to a man who is your father's enemy."

"I understand your position," the girl said. "You feel that being my father's daughter, I wouldn't talk with you if I knew that you and he were not friends. You'd naturally assume that my loyalty was to him."

"Isn't it?" Wister asked sharply.

"Why, yes, of course it is. That's why I wanted to see you. I know that there's a possibility of trouble, and I dread the thought of it. I don't want to see my father make a mistake and drag us all into something we'll all be sorry for later. I know that if my father knew you, and if you understood each other, you could get things straightened out without the necessity of anything so horrible as a range war."

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully, "but I wish you didn't feel that way. Your father has his ideas, and he's going to try to put them into effect. I don't agree with him. He's not likely to change. Neither am I. And so that leaves you no choice but to be on his side of the fence."

"Give me a chance to try to straighten matters up between you two before something terrible happens."

"What could you do?" he asked. "What have you got in mind?"

"What I'd like to do is to introduce you to my brother. The three of us can talk over ways to convince my father that our ideas are right. Rube can influence my father, and he can arrange it so that we can all get together and settle the matter peaceably. Wouldn't that make more sense than shooting each other up all over the mountains?"

"It would if it would work," Wister admitted.

"Then give us a chance, won't you?"

"Well," Wister answered, "Send your brother over and I'll talk to him."

"Oh, that wouldn't do," the girl said quickly. "The Colonel would find out about it because they are together almost all the time. The only time we could all get together without him finding it out at the time would be—let me see—" she stopped to ponder a long moment, then she added, "There's a dance in town Saturday night, and the Colonel hates dances. He won't even go to town when they hold them and he would hear the music. But Rube is taking me. Now if you met Rube there—"

"Well, I'll meet you and your brother

there," he promised. "If he can manage to call your father's dogs off, it suits me."

She gave him a smile and said, "That's all anybody could ask, and I think it's wonderful of you to be so agreeable. Help me up, will you?"

He took her arm and helped her up from her seat on the log. She tried her weight on her left foot gingerly, made a little grimace of pain, then held tightly to his arm to keep her weight off the favored foot.

"Carry me," she said, pertly.

He took her in his arms to lift her and carry her to her horse. She clung to him, both arms around his neck, and the look that she gave him had provocative promise.

Reaching the horse, he lifted her higher while she got her good foot in the stirrup and threw the other over the saddle. Then as she picked up the reins, she threw the full charm of her smile at him.

"I'm sure we're going to be awfully good friends," she promised. "You're much too nice a person for us to be fighting with. I'd rather be dancing with you. So, until Saturday night."

"But that foot," he cautioned her.

"It'll be all right by then. Good bye till Saturday night."

She spurred her horse down the tree-shaded trail, turned and waved at him, and was gone.

Wister got his horse and set off to overtake his crew. He came upon them halfway home; they had not found any more stock in the pocket he had indicated. Malone was not with them.

"Where is Ed?" he asked Blair as he rode up beside the man.

"I don't know, and I don't care," Blair answered grouchily. "He just up and rode off without saying anything except to tell you he'd see you later. I don't like that man. He won't stick."

"What do you want him to stick around for?"

"We'll need every gun we can get," Blair answered. "People don't do what we done to Buckner without him having an answer for it."

"You think Buckner will hit us in a hurry; is that it?"

"If he don't, then he ain't Buckner no more."

They rode on to the ranch quarters in silence, and put their horses up. Wister went on to the house to make a record of the cattle he had recovered.

Tush Hog Terry had not spoken a word since the showdown, but had ridden in detached meditation all day. Now he went into the bunkhouse where Bud Willows was cooking the meal. He went over to an old pile of magazines lying in a dusty corner behind a bunk and dragged them out and began studying the advertising sections until he found an ad he was looking for.

He tore it out of the page, then on second thought, tore the whole page out of the book, so that nobody could identify the particular ad in which he was interested. Then he got a wash basin and, stripping, washed himself all over, and then put on clean clothes.

He stopped at the table long enough to eat a plate of beans. He got up from the table and said, "I'll see you boys later."

He went out to the corral and roped a fresh horse and saddled him. He pulled the ad out of his pocket and read it again:

> FALSE TEETH! BRIDGE WORK! PLATES OR BRIDGES FITTED PERFECTLY AT LOWEST COST. TEETH SO NATURAL THAT YOUR FRIENDS WILL NEVER SUSPECT THEY ARE FALSE. IF YOU CAN'T COME TO OUR LABORATORY, SEND LETTER FOR PARTICULARS. WE CAN FIT YOU BY MAIL. LIGHTNING FAST SERVICE. SATISFACTION GUARANTEED.
> WESTERN DENTAL LABORATORIES,
> FORT WORTH, TEXAS.

He placed the ad in his billfold with a sheaf of currency, mounted his horse and rode off toward Oxbow.

RUBY BUCKNER rode into her yard a little before dinnertime, and found her father still sitting on the porch in an evil mood.

"Colonel," she said. "There's going to be a dance in town Saturday night, and I am going to disgrace you."

He looked at her with only half interest.

"You usually do," he growled.

She bit back a retort, and then answered, "Well, this time, the town is going to think you're bankrupt."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What else could they think when they see me at a dance wearing nothing but rags that will barely hang onto me?"

The old man snorted. "Clothes! Is that all you ever think about?"

The old man dug down in his pocket and came out with an enormous roll of bills. He peeled off three one-hundred-dollar notes from the roll, and returned the roll to his pocket, holding onto the bills.

"I'll give you the money," he said, "But I want you to do an errand for me first."

"What is it?" she asked suspiciously. "Kill Wister for you?"

"I can handle that young man myself," he snapped. "And don't be getting the idea that I can't. I want you to ride over to Harmon's for me and tell him I want to see him."

"Oh," she said. "You're going to have Harmon kill him for you?"

"I ought to slap your face," Colonel Buckner roared. "If you were a boy, I'd do it."

"But I'm not, and you won't." She held out her hand. Give me the money."

He handed her the bills. "Now get Harmon over here, and tell him I said come in a hurry."

Harmon was having supper in his cabin alone when Ruby Buckner rode up and called to him. He came out the front door, saw her and invited her in. She slid off the horse and sat down on the bench beside the front door.

"The Colonel wants to see you," Ruby said with a malicious smile. "Right away."

She carefully gave her message a tone implying that it was a command, and she smiled when she saw him color under his own recognition of it.

"I'm afraid that it would not be convenient!" he said defensively. "I've made other plans for this evening."

"I'm afraid you'll have to change your plans," she taunted. "The Colonel's orders."

"I'm afraid I can't do that," he answered stiffly. "In the first place, I'm not taking orders from anybody, particularly from the Colonel. I have my own affairs to take care of. I'll see your father when I get around to it."

She eyed him with amusement.

"You talk very independently, Vince. At least, to me. Shall I deliver your answer precisely as you gave it?"

Vince Harmon bit his lip, regretting that she had taunted him into declaring an independence of the Colonel which the Colonel would not take well. He changed his tone.

"Look here, Ruby," he said persuasively, "Nobody likes to be ordered around like a soldier or a slave or something. What does the old man want?"

"Go see for yourself," Ruby answered innocently. "I suppose it has something to do with the murder and robbery of Jim Wister which you two are hatching up, don't you?"

She spoke the words gently, and searched his face carefully noting the blood rush to his cheeks as his anger arose.

"Why do you say a thing like that?" he demanded. "You are putting an entirely wrong construction on a set of circumstances that you don't understand at all."

"Are you sure I don't understand simple facts?" she asked softly. "Wister has got land and cattle you both want, and you intend to get it. It's just that simple, isn't it?"

"You don't understand. Wister's place has harbored rustlers—"

The girl waved her hand, interrupting him impatiently.

"Don't talk like a fool," she snapped. "I have heard that from my father. You want that land, and you're building a fire under the man that owns it." She studied him thoughtfully. "You know, I don't think you'll make a very successful thief. You're too transparent. The trouble with you is that you're too guillible; you believe your own lies, and that's fatal to a crook."

Harmon pounded the doorsill savagely with his fist. "Damn you, Ruby, you're the most insulting person I ever met."

"No, Vince, just the most truthful," she answered. She slid over on the bench. "Come here and sit down beside me. There was a time when you'd have done it without invitation." He sat down on the bench beside her, but held his reserve. She put an arm around his waist and dropped her

head on his chest. "You know, Vince, when I used to do this while you were angry, it would make you purr like a cat."

She reached a hand up and stroked his head. "And that used to lift your hair right up on end. Remember?"

He said nothing.

"Does Martha Terrill stroke your head like this when you're angry?" she asked softly.

"Leave Martha out of this," he said, still half angry. "It's different between us than it was between you and me."

"I imagine so," she answered. "Somehow I can't imagine her—"

The sound of an approaching horseman roused Harmon. He looked up and recognized the man who had stopped his animal about twenty feet away. He angrily took Ruby's arm from around his waist and got up quickly.

"Howdy, Mr. Terrill. I didn't hear you ride up."

Terrill got off his horse without speaking. He bowed stiffly to Ruby, raising his hat slightly. "Am I interrupting?" he asked.

"No," Harmon assured him in a quick nervous voice. "Ruby—Miss Buckner just stopped off a minute with a message from the Colonel."

"I see," Bob Terrill answered. "Well, I won't intrude. I'll come back some other time."

"You're not intruding," Harmon answered quickly. "Miss Buckner was just leaving."

Terrill looked at Ruby Buckner and she gave him a provocative smile. "Yes," she agreed. "I should have left an hour or so ago."

She had, in fact, been with Harmon less then fifteen minutes. She turned and gave Harmon a possessive smile. "Will you untie my horse, darling?" she asked.

He bowed and smiled. "Why, of course," and went off with her toward the hitchrail.

Out of Terrill's hearing, he said in an undertone. "You damned little cat! You saw him coming! That's why you started pawing me like that."

"Did I really?" she asked innocently, as he helped her into her saddle. "Well, talk yourself out of that one, Silver Tongue."

She spurred her horse out of the yard and set his head toward home, a malicious feeling of staisfaction pervading her. She felt better than she had felt in a long time. Life was becoming interesting for the first time in lo, these many moons.

VI

VINCE HARMON wiped his forehead and joined Terrill who had sat down on the bench and was filling his pipe.

"Look here, Mr. Terrill," he said, "That old affair between me and Ruby is a thing of the past. She came here with a message from her father, and when she saw you riding up, she put on that act, just to make trouble for me."

The old man said, "Well, it's not for me to look into a man's past; it's what he is now that concerns me. I came by here to talk to you about this new situation that's come up since young Wister came home. It looks like trouble might be shaping up."

"Yes," he said, "there could be trouble, and I hate to see it. I've always liked Wister, and it's hard for me to believe that he deliberately allowed his place to be used for rustler's headquarters. If Blair has been stealing stock, then he could have been doing it on his own without Wister knowing about it."

"That's what I was thinking," Terrill answered. "And I'm not the only one that thinks that way. Drew and Lewter were at the meeting the other night, you remember, and they didn't seem to fall in with Buckner's ideas any too easily. This morning, I took it on myself to go over and have a talk with them about things."

"How do they feel about it?"

"They didn't want to come right out and say so at the meeting, but they felt something like I did, that Buckner is just using the little rustling that's going on around here as an excuse to move against Circle W and take over that land. Matter of fact, they've been approached by Buckner, and I was just wondering if Buckner has approached you, too."

"What kind of proposition did Buckner make them?"

"A division of the land. His idea was that the brand had been declared open, and that anybody could brand any Circle W stuff they found. Then all those that would help him when he moved in on Wister's land

would get a part of it, the division to be made after they'd cleared the land of Wister and his crew."

"And they didn't like the idea?" Harmon asked.

"The idea wouldn't do them much good in the long run," the old man said. "Even if they were willing to go in on such a deal—which they don't think is the right thing to do—they wouldn't have stood to get much out of it. Buckner, with his big crew, could round up and brand practically every Circle W cow in the mountains while they, without much help, probably couldn't find twenty head of stock for themselves. And as to a division of the land, once Buckner got established on it—well, anybody that knows Buckner wouldn't plan on him dividing with them. Has Buckner propositioned you?"

"Well, he's been saying things that sounded like he was feeling me out in a vague sort of way, and I answered him in about the same way. I didn't tell him anything he could put his finger on."

"How do you actually feel about it?" Terrill asked pointedly.

"Well, there's two ways to looking at it. I don't want to do the wrong thing, but if that is outlaw range, and is going to be divided, I hate to see Buckner take it all. But on the other hand, I'm a friend of Wister, as long as I can believe that he's straight."

Terrill got to his feet. "It's not my business to tell you what to do," he said. "But I thought I'd let you know that Buckner is not going to be able to drag the whole neighborhood in to do his dirty work for him.

"So, you won't be alone if you refuse to buckle down under his pressure."

"I appreciate you telling me this," Harmon said. "I want to do the right thing, and your advice helps a lot. I'll think it over."

The old man went to his horse, and Harmon followed him.

"About that other matter," he said. "I hope you don't hold that against me." It was a question, the way he said it.

"It's not for me to judge people," old Terrill said. "What's past is past. I always take a man at his word unless I've got reason not to."

HARMON rode into the Buckner ranch quarters after dark and shouted at the front porch. There was a light inside, but Buckner's voice came from the darkness of the porch.

"Get down and come in, Harmon," the Colonel ordered.

Harmon left his horse at the rack and came up onto the porch where in the dark he could see the Colonel sitting slouched in his chair, a cigar making a red pinpoint near its arm.

"Drag up a chair and sit down," the Colonel ordered.

Harmon sensed something unusual in the Colonel's voice, but he could not find the meaning of it, other than the Colonel did not seem to be as he usually was.

"No thanks," he said. "I'll stand."

"Suit yourself," the Colonel growled.

Then Harmon got closer to the thing that was puzzling him about the Colonel. The old man was frustrated and sore about something. There was a weariness in the way he spoke, and a deep-seated anger, as though he had taken a temporary beating and was nursing a deep grudge.

"Ruby said you wanted to see me," Harmon said.

"Yes. Did you give Blair my message last night?"

"I sure did, Colonel, Didn't he do his job?"

"He did not!" the Colonel snapped.

And now Harmon knew his answer. The Colonel had tangled with Wister and had not won his battle.

"Well, I'll have to jump him again," Harmon said.

"Never mind," the Colonel said. "I don't give a man a second chance. Blair failed me, and he's out of the deal. It's up to you, now, Harmon."

"What do you mean?"

"It's up to you to kill Wister."

Harmon heard the Colonel's words with a shock at the sudden brutality of them. He did not answer immediately, but busied himself fashioning a cigarette, the darkness hiding his face while he tried to fit this order into his scheme of things.

Having sensed that Buckner had suffered a defeat, his fear of and respect for the Colonel's impregnability had dropped several notches, while his own self-confidence

had mounted proportionately.

"Why don't you kill Wister yourself if you want him killed?"

"Because it suits me to pay you to do it!" the Colonel answered snappishly. "I promised to cut you in on this deal if you would work with me on it. This is part of the work which you are to do."

"Yes," Harmon purred. "So it seems. But you didn't mention it at the time."

"I'm mentioning it now."

"And another thing we didn't bring up. Just what is my cut on this deal?"

"We'll settle that after we get the land cleared off," Buckner said. "I'm a liberal man."

"Now that you've decided the nature of the work you want me to do, I think it is a good time to decide on the size of the cut."

"What do you want for doing that job?"

"I'll take that portion of Circle W lying east of the creek. That will leave you all of it on your side of the creek, and connected up with yours. That all right?"

"You fool, you're asking for two-thirds of it!"

"I hadn't figured it down to the acre," Harmon admitted easily. "Maybe it is that much. But I'll be satisfied with it."

"You might as well ask for all of it!" the Colonel said.

"No," Harmon admitted. "I'm not a big enough man to handle all of it—yet."

"And you never will be!" the Colonel snapped. "You'll take what I give you or nothing."

"And what will you give me?"

"That thousand acres lying between the two peaks to the northeast of the creek."

"With no road, no buildings, no shelter, no water. No thanks! I reckon, Colonel, you'd better make other arrangements."

"I can do that!" the Colonel said.

"Then I won't keep you up any longer," Harmon said. "Good night, Colonel."

He turned and walked off the porch. The Colonel let him get perhaps fifty feet before he called him back.

Harmon came back and said, "Yes?"

"Well," the Colonel drawled, "there's enough for both of us. You can have that piece you wanted—provided you do the job, and do it right away."

"Now that's more businesslike," Harmon said. He knew that the Colonel had no intention of keeping his word. But neither did he, and the plan he had formed on the spur of the moment would give him the edge on the Colonel.

"When are you going to get the job done?" the Colonel asked.

"Saturday night."

HAVING left Blair earlier in the day, Malone had turned his horse into the woods and ridden back trails for three hours when he came to a cabin high in the piney woods. Receiving no answer when he called "Uncle Joe," he dismounted and tied his horse, loosening his saddle girth and taking the animal's bridle off so he could drink at the spring, eat and rest.

"Indian Ear" Joe Greer's cabin was built of pine logs with only a single open doorway in it. On the outer walls were several skins stretched on drying boards, and a pile of fireplace wood was growing against the coming winter.

Malone went inside, where a great pile of steel traps lay in one corner of the neat room, a made-up bunk was built into another corner. The inner walls were hung with bundles of weeds, dug up by the root.

Across the beaten clay from the bunk there was a big fireplace of clay-chinked stones, and an iron skillet and pot hanging from pegs. Malone took a dried tenderloin of venison down from the nail where it hung by a string from the rafter, and cut off a few slices and fried them, making coffee as they cooked.

Before he was through eating, old Joe Greer came in. He had left a black mule outside, removing from his saddle two feedbags of fresh weeds which he brought in. He threw the weeds in the corner, ignored Malone until he had gone to the fireplace and got himself a tin cup of coffee from the bucket boiling on the hearth. Then he sat down on a rawhide-bottomed chair and relaxed.

"Hot out," he finally observed, after blowing on his coffee, and then drinking the scalding liquid down without removing the cup from his mouth.

Uncle Joe Greer had been in and out of these mountains a long time, and everybody

knew him by sight. But Ed Malone, who was a kind of distant nephew of his, was one of the few who knew the story back of him.

Uncle Joe had come to the Indian Nations as a young man, bringing a wife and baby girl in his wagon-load of farming equipment, the whole of his possessions. He had built his cabin and broken his land at the foot of the mountains, and had put in his first crop.

And then he had hitched up his team and driven the wagon twenty miles to the nearest settlement to buy some needed supplies. It had taken him three days to make the forty-mile round trip, and when he got back he found his cabin in smoking ruins and his milk cow and hogs gone.

He called for his wife and his child, and they did not answer. He went to the woods back of his house and looked for them. And there he found them lying dead. They had been murdered and scalped by the Indians.

As the family told it later, the young man did not shed a tear. He went back to the ruins of the cabin and dug a single grave under the big sycamore tree where they had built the house, and he buried his wife and baby in the grave. Then he took his rifle and a long handled hunting knife, and got on the back of one of his mules and rode away from the remains of the little home he had built and, as they called it in the Nations, he "took to the woods."

He lived off the woods, hunting and fishing, trapping a little in winter and gathering ginsing root and jimson-weed root and other salable medicinal roots and herbs which he traded to storekeepers for the meager supplies he needed from civilization while he pursued his main and life-long occupation—killing Indians.

He became as wily a woodsman and hunter as any Indian. He could slip into an Indian camp and kill half a dozen Indian men and cut their ears off for his tally string without the rest of the Indians knowing until the next morning that he had been there. But they knew who had been there when they found their dead warriors with their ears missing.

Indian Ear Greer was an old man now; he had a string of dried Indian ears which was so long that he could throw it over his shoulder and it would drag the ground behind him and in front of him.

The bad Indians were all gone, brought under control by the government, and he no longer hunted his grizzly trophies. But otherwise he did not change.

Greer was a tall man with a big frame which had little flesh on it. He wore whiskers, and his lips were sunken in because most of his teeth were gone. He had pulled them out one at a time with a pair of fencing pliers as they began aching.

"Been getting around much lately?" Malone asked him.

"Oh, a little. Found some new patches of ginsing over by the falls."

"See anything interesting, wandering around?"

The old man stuffed his pipe thoughtfully. "Interesting how?" he asked without looking up.

"Well, this is what puzzles me," Malone said. Then he explained Wister's situation. "Now Ruby Buckner pulls a fast one which I can't read. She waylays Wister in the trail while we're out looking for cattle, puts on a little act about her horse throwing her—which he didn't—and gets right chummy with him, sending me away on a stall. Now what's worrying me is that she's got something up her sleeve that she's trying to steer him off of. I don't know what it is, but it's something around close. You know, like a mother quail will attract attention to herself by playing cripple when you get too close to her nest. What I want to know is, what could it be? Got any ideas? Seen anything that might fit into that picture?"

"You say this Wister didn't know where his cows was going?"

"No. He only knows that Buckner branded some of them."

"Well that explains it," the old man said. "It was puzzling me all along."

"What was?"

"That Circle W stuff that was bein' throwed into a pocket over along Baldtop from time to time. They was drove in there by this Blair you mention, and by Harmon. They'd graze them there for a time, and then those cows would be drove through the notch to Blanco, or down that way somewheres. I just reckoned they was usin'

the place for a holdin' pasture till they was ready to drive."

"Blair and Harmon in cahoots! he said. "I'd never have figured that, with all the airs Harmon puts on."

"All four-flushing!" Old Joe Greer said disgustedly.

Malone came to a sudden decision. "Look here, Uncle Joe, I want you to do me a favor."

"Just so's I ain't gettin' mixed up in other people's business."

"Well, I'm mixed up in it, because I know what these mountains will be like if Buckner spreads out much more. What you tell me doesn't answer the question of what Ruby Buckner has got up her sleeve, but it fits in some way. It's got to, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"What do you care?"

"Jim Wister is a friend of mine, and I don't want to see him get hurt. That's excuse enough. I'm going over there to that pocket at Baldtop, and I'm going to hang around there till I see what the answer is. I want you to give me a little jerky and some coffee and flour, and then tomorrow, while you're out, I want you to ride down to Circle W and tell Wister that I'm up here on business—his business. And don't leave the message with anybody else. Get it on him direct. Will you?"

"Sure, if you want it that way," Uncle Joe agreed. "But I've lived a long time, and I ain't never seen it pay off to get yourself mixed up in other people's troubles.

"It's not a matter of being paid off with me," Malone said quietly. "I just like Jim Wister."

"Your business," the old man said. "Help yourself to what you want."

VII

JIM WISTER had spent the remainder of the week combing through the hills looking for stock with his brand on it, and bringing it in and throwing it into range closer to headquarters so that he could count it and keep an eye on it. There wasn't very much to find.

He had been worried about Malone. He questioned Blair again. Blair repeated his story that Malone had just ridden off.

"It's a funny thing," Wister said. "Malone disappears one day, and Tush Hog Terry disappears that night. Where did Terry go?"

"I don't know," Blair said. "He just up and left."

"Just a little while after Malone up and left," Wister said. "That might be a coincidence, and it might not."

This conversation had taken place on Friday morning at the corral. On a sudden impulse, Wister said, "You boys go out and look for more stock. I'm going to see what happened to Malone."

He rode off in the general direction of the higher reaches of the mountains, toward the location of Malone's cabin. He had gone only a few miles when he met old Indian Ear Greer on his mule.

After a few words, the old herb hunter said, "Ed told me if I seen you, tell you that he was on some business of your'n. Reckon he'll be along when it's over, whatever it is."

"Ed gave you that message, did he?" Wister asked.

"Yeah. Didn't say what it meant, though. Allowed you'd know."

"Yeah," Wister answered in kind. "Thanks, Uncle Joe."

"No trouble," the old man answered.

Wister turned and rode back to his ranch, knowing that Malone had discovered something, or had got an idea that was of some importance. There was nothing to do about it except to wait until Malone returned and told him what it was.

Saturday morning Wister went out to the bunkhouse. It was after eight o'clock, and nobody was stirring.

"You boys sleep late," he commented. They were sitting around the table with their breakfast.

"First Saturday in the month," Blair explained. "Nobody works on dance Saturday. We're going to spend the day in town getting ready for the dance. Shave and haircut and all. We don't have any other time to do it."

"You will from now on. When you work for me, I'm the one that says when you work and when you don't," Wister answered. "Blair, you can stick around if you've got what it takes. The rest of you won't be needed on Circle W any longer.

Blair hired you, you can collect from him."

"Like hell," Blair barked. "As long as I'm running this ranch I do the hiring and firing."

"But you are not running it now," Wister reminded him. "You hired these men, and they wouldn't ride with me. I've got no use for them, and so I'm not paying them. I have an idea they've done enough for you personally to warrant you paying them their wages out of your own pocket—or is it my pocket?"

"When they go, I go!" Blair said. "I won't stand for anybody firing men I hire. No owner does that."

"I do," Wister said. "And if you're quitting with them, then don't forget to dig up your books and settle up first. Otherwise, when I get through looking over things here there might be a case of embezzlement against you. I'm going to have an accounting out of you if I have to take it out of your hide."

"Do you think you can talk to a man that way, and keep him working for you?"

"No, not the average man, but I can talk to you that way, because you're figuring on making something more off me by hanging around to get your cut out of the steal. You know that if you go away, some of your crooked partners will cut you out of the deal. So you'll be around, no matter what I say to you."

He turned his attention back to the men. "Get your stuff off the place when you ride out to the dance."

Then he turned his back and walked out to the bunkhouse without hearing a word of protest from anybody except Blair, who said to his back, "We'll see about that, mister."

The men, including Blair, rode out an hour or so later. Wister, watching them pass the house, noted that they did not have their war bags on their saddles, and this gave him some thought. Had they decided to refuse to accept his authority? He eventually decided that the matter was not worth giving any thought to.

But he had decided to get a new crew, and for this reason he cleaned up early and rode into town, hoping to find a few men, if possible, before night and the dance. As to whether Ruby Buckner's idea of settling the trouble would come to anything or not, he did not know. In any event, he had to have a crew of men he could depend on.

WISTER rode into Oxbow in the shank of the afternoon, and found the town beginning to fill up with people from the outcountry. He went to the barbershop and waited his turn for a haircut and shave.

There was a man lying back in the chair with a hot towel on his face, and when the barber took the towel off and straightened the chair up, Wister saw that it was Vince Harmon. When the barber got through with Vince, Wister gave up his turn to the next man and walked out onto the street with him.

"Look here, Vince," he said as they stood on the edge of the walk in front of the shop, "I've got to get me a crew of some kind, three or four men I can depend on."

Harmon was very casual. "What's the matter?"

"I fired the crew this morning."

After a moment he said, "I don't know of any riders around here looking for jobs. I'm going to have to ride over to Blanco tomorrow or next day, and I believe I can pick up some men for you there. What do you want, riders or gun-hands?"

"What do you think?"

"I know there's talk of trouble in the air," Harmon said, "but I wouldn't take it too seriously. When Buckner sees that you're getting a clean crew he'll probably drop the idea of making trouble. I'd lay off gun-hands just to show him you don't intend to look for trouble yourself."

"You may be right," Wister said. "Just get me some men with ordinary guts."

Harmon said, "Sure. That'll probably lay the ghost."

Wister went back into the barber shop.

Harmon walked down to the saloon, with his mind full of this new situation. He was thinking of the turn of events at Wister's place, when Tebo Landseer stepped up to him and motioned to the bartender for drinks from his private bottle.

Landseer owned the saloon. He was an immaculate, slender man with fair skin which the sun never had an opportunity to turn brown. He wore a black broadcloth suit, with a white silk shirt and a black tie,

the traditional dress of the gambler, the profession that he had so long followed.

"Here's a piece of paper of yours that's a little overdue," Landseer said. His voice was low and gentle.

Harmon recognized his I. O. U. for two thousand dollars.

"Oh, that," he said off-handedly. "Just hold onto it a week or so longer, do you mind? I'm working out a deal now. It'll be closed in a few days and I can take care of it then."

Landseer's smile was only skin deep. "I wish I could, Harmon, but the way things are right now, I can't see how I can. I've got a deal on to furnish the Indian Agency some beef, and I haven't got any of my own that's ready to turn loose right now. That means I'll have to buy beef to fill my contract, and I'll need the money to do it with."

"What have you got in the way of beef?"

"Oh, you know. Anything that can stand up on its four legs till the Government man can count it and pay off."

Harmon pondered this. "I wish I had the beef to give you to fill that contract with, but I haven't got it right now. However, in a week or so—"

"What about that fifty or so head of stuff you and Blair drove up to Baldtop Mountain? I could allow you a thousand on that if you drove it to the Agency for me."

Harmon's hand stopped halfway to his mouth with his liquor glass. Finally he said, "You've got the wrong idea about something. I helped Blair drive some Circle W stuff up there to hold. But that's Wister's stuff, not mine."

"It *was* Wister's until you and Blair hid it, just the same as you've driven off most of that herd and sold it down at Blanco. Suppose we skip the bluffing and get down to showing our hole cards. You and Blair have been robbing Circle W blind. This young Wister has showed up, and that business is over, except for that little dab of stuff you've got hid up there on the side of Baldtop. You owe me what you'll get for that, and more. I want you to pay me a thousand on this paper with that stuff before it's too late."

Harmon broke out in a sweat. "You seem to know a hell of a lot about what's going on."

"I have to know things," Landseer answered. "And I have lots of friends."

"You haven't got a friend in the world, and you know it," Harmon answered. "All you've got is a few dollars."

"And a dollar is your only friend," Landseer remarked quietly, "so my statement still stands. But that's not the point. The point is, you've got to get those cattle started to the Indian Agency before morning. You haven't much time."

"Not a chance," Harmon answered. "Like you said, Wister is milling around here. I'll get 'em out some night next week."

"That'll be too late. They'll have to go tonight."

"Why?" Harmon argued. "What difference does a couple or three days make?"

"It makes the difference between who gets the money, you or young Buckner."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"He knows they're there, and he plans to drive them to Blanco tonight. That's why you've got to get started with them before he gets his hands on them."

"Why that dirty thief!" Harmon snapped. "Where does he get any claim to that stuff?"

"It's Circle W, and Colonel Buckner has declared Circle W brand open for the man that'll take it, hasn't he?"

"How do you know what Rube is figuring on."

"He came looking for a couple of men to help him make a drive. I got him a couple."

"You furnished Rube Buckner hands to steal my stock?"

"I send them along with Rube to find out what he was up to. You'd be in a jam right now, if I hadn't managed to know what's going on. So, I've done you a favor. What are you going to do about it?"

Harmon said. "One thing I'll tell you for sure; young Buckner is not going to steal that stock of mine."

"He'd better not," Landseer said. "That would make it kind of tough for you to take up this paper, wouldn't it?"

VINCE HARMON walked the street for a while, absent-mindedly answering an occasional greeting from the men who

were gradually filling up the town for the night's dance. Things were coming to a head so fast that he was not altogether prepared to face them. But something had to be done, and be done quickly, now that Landseer's demands entered into the picture.

He saw Dirk Blair's horse tied to the rack in front of the saloon across the street from Landseer's, and he stopped and speculated for another moment, his thoughts taking a new and more resolute turn. Coming to one of his snap decisions, he walked into the saloon.

He went up to the bar, and as he ordered a drink he saw Blair and Squatty Marble standing at the other end. Blair saw him through the backbar mirror, caught a quick look from Harmon's eye, and continued his drinking as though he had not seen Harmon come in.

Harmon finished his drink, bought a cigar and went back out, where he stood in front of the saloon a moment or two biting the top off the cigar and lighting it. Then he slowly walked on down the street to the stable.

He stood in front of the livery stable smoking until he saw Blair stroll out of the saloon and look casually up and down the street. When he knew that Blair had seen him, he went into the big livery barn, passed through it completely, and emerged in the rear horse lot. He crossed the lot, climbed over the fence and walked on the hundred or so feet to the point where the woods covered the mountainside, and here the trees swallowed him up.

A few minutes later Blair came upon him, having taken a different trail through the woods to this point where they had met before. Blair had taken a few drinks, and his rough going over at the hands of Wister this morning had kept him in a bad frame of mind.

Harmon sat on a deadfall tree and Blair stood in front of him, too much on edge to sit down.

"Wister tells me you pulled out of Circle W this morning." Harmon said.

"Yeah. I ain't standing for the kind of abuse he dishes out."

"Why didn't you do something about it then and there?"

"Are you loco?" Blair snapped. "I didn't have my gun on and he did. That answers that."

"Careless," Harmon said. "Well, you won't have to stand for his abuse any longer. It's payday."

"What do you mean?"

"The longer Wister hangs around, the deeper he gets his feet dug in, and the harder it is to uproot him. You've got the best chance you'll ever have to get that little job done tonight, and get him out of the way."

"Just like that, huh? Just step up and let him have it, easy like. And what's he going to be doing while I let him have it? Them boys in the Rangers, most of them, at least, knows which end of a gun the bullet comes out of. Some of 'em even knows how to shoot a gun, themselves. I hear it whispered around that Wister is one of them." Blair's voice was acid.

"I didn't say stand up and shoot it out with him, you damned fool. There'll be a thousand chances as soon as it gets dark. Get Squatty to set him up for you. Let Squatty tell him that somebody wants to see him somewhere, or something like that."

"And he's supposed to believe what Squatty says, and follow him into a deadfall, just like a stray puppy or something? I'll tell you something; Wister stands on his own two legs. Ask Buckner."

"That reminds me. What happened between him and Buckner?"

"Oh, nothing. Only that Buckner digs a hole for him, figuring on shooting him dead, and he rides into the hole and takes one look at Buckner, who had Rube and three-four other men with him, and Buckner sticks his tail between his legs and rides away like a whipped puppy. That's all. I never seed the like of it."

"All the more reason we've got to get rid of him before he gets squared off good," Harmon argued.

"All the more reason a man's got to be careful," Blair objected.

"I'll set him up for you, myself," Harmon insisted. "But it's got to be done."

"And everybody will know I did it."

"No, it is Buckner's orders. Buckner will have to cover you, or take the blame himself. He's giving you another chance to do what he sent you word to do before. He don't usually give anybody a second chance.

He told me that, himself."

"To hell with Buckner."

"That's not the way to look at it," Harmon explained patiently. "We'll get this done, and Buckner thinks it was done at his orders. He will know he's the guilty party. We'll be in the clear, and have the dogwood on Buckner for later use."

"How will that put us in the clear?"

"Because we'll be somewhere else. There's an old stunt that smart men use, and it's fool proof. If you want to cover a big job you're pulling here, build up evidence that you were in some smaller mischief somewhere else. Get it?"

"No, I don't get it."

"All right. We'll kill Wister here, then we'll hightail it to Baldtop and drive those cattle down to Blanco, or the Indian Agency, where we can sell them. If anybody was to go checking on your movements they'd find that you couldn't have been here to kill Wister because you were busy driving his cattle over the mountain. The fact that you're doing something crooked later will make it look like that's all you were doing. Who'd figure on you pulling two different stunts in one night? See now how it works?"

"Yeah, but—"

"But nothing. This is it, Blair! Before daylight, we'll be the owners of Circle W. And then let Buckner try to put us off, with him being the one that ordered Wister killed! It's perfect and fool proof."

Blair thought it over. And pacing the ground before Harmon, he thought still farther about the matter. He could follow Harmon's plan to the point where they sold the stock down at the Indian Agency, and then, he asked himself thoughtfully, what further use would he have for Harmon?

By Harmon's own reasoning, they would be down there selling stolen stock. Blair almost smiled. Mr. Vince Harmon, the big planner, would have served his purpose. He would be killed down around Blanco while engaged in rustling Circle W stock. That would get rid of Harmon, and it would point to Harmon as the man who had killed Wister, probably because Wister had suspected Harmon of being the man behind the rustling.

"Yes," Blair said to Harmon. "I believe you're got it worked out just right. Now, the only trick is to get Wister in the dark while the dance is going on."

They both sat on the log and perfected their plans. And each made his own mental reservations as to what would follow.

BLAIR left Harmon after a little while and went back to his saloon, where he went to the bar and ordered a drink. He started to lift his glass when he paused with it in midair while his eyes focused on a man in the crowd farther down the line. He blinked a couple of times, his face took on a puzzled expression, and then one of disbelief. He swallowed his drink quickly and wiped his mouth, and then looked again at the sight of Tush Hog Terry, whom he had difficulty recognizing.

Terry saw him at about the same time, and came down the bar to where Blair stood.

"I'd like a word with you," he told Blair.

"What in the living hell's happened to you?" Blair exclaimed.

"Nothing," Terry said gravely. "I just finally got around to replacing those teeth I lost several years ago. Went to Fort Worth."

Blair looked him over, noted his neat haircut, the clean clothes, and whiteness of his teeth, and even the fact that his fingernails had been cleaned. Then Blair lifted his head and began laughing. He laughed uproariously, while Terry stood before him a moment, his face growing hard.

"The Tush Hog himself," Blair said between howls. "Done turned pretty on us—"

Terry took a deep breath, and with a touch of resignation he doubled his fist and knocked Blair halfway across the room.

Blair took his time about getting up. He stood up, spread his feet and started to reach for his gun, his eyes narrowing in his cold rage.

Terry jerked Blair's gun out of its pouch with surprising speed and hefted it like a short club, leaving Blair standing awkwardly before him, disarmed.

"Don't you ever open that face to laugh at me again," Terry said, "or I'll have to beat you to death. Now what I wanted to tell you was that I'm quitting. I'm not working for you any more. That's all. I'll give your gun to the bartender later, and you can pick it up."

Terry shoved Blair's gun in his belt and turned and walked out of the saloon.

It took Blair a long moment to get his mind into action, and then he suddenly followed Terry out the door and called him back.

"Look here," Blair said. "Maybe I was wrong; I didn't know how touchy you felt about them missing teeth. But here's the idea, you can't quit me right now. Things are going to break right soon—tonight, as a matter of fact. I'll need you."

"Get somebody else!"

"Hell, you can't walk out on me just when we're gettin' ready to collect. Tonight is payday. Me and Harmon has got it all worked out to the last detail. You see, Wister is—"

"Hold it, Blair," Terry interrupted. "I went along with you for a while, but I'm not with you any more. I told you I was through. What's past is past, and I don't go around talking my head off. But whatever you've got on your mind from now on, leave me out. I don't even want to know about it."

Blair was speechless, and he gazed at Terry long enough to see that Terry was serious. Something had happened to Terry to change him. Blair could not guess what it was, but he knew the change was there, and he knew better than to talk to him any further.

"Why you dirty double-crossing skunk," he said. "All right, you're out. I was going to make you foreman, but you throwed away your chance."

"That's it," Terry said quietly. "I'm throwing away my chance."

"I'm telling you one thing," Blair warned, "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, knowing as much as you do about things you shouldn't."

"I'd thought of that," Terry admitted. "But I'll try to make out."

VIII

TERRY bumped squarely into Wister coming down the street. Wister stopped in front of him as though to speak, then held his tongue and observed him curiously, as though not sure he was seeing the man he expected to see. Terry, in turn, waited tensely, his senses reaching out like the feelers of a grasshopper, to register Wister's attitude.

Wister said, "Howdy, Terry. I was wondering what happened to you."

Terry felt a slight relief. Wister had not made any objectionable remark so far.

"I had to take a little time off," he said. "I'd been wanting to get some dental work done for quite a while, and finally decided to get it over with."

"Good idea," Wister said. "I went around for years neglecting my teeth, and ended up having to buy half a dozen new ones."

"I should have done it before," Terry said. His courage was returning. "Say, I wonder if I could have a little talk with you? I've got a room up over the restaurant. Won't keep you long."

"All right," Wister said. "We'll have that talk."

They went down the street together and upstairs to Terry's small shabby room over the restaurant. Terry had an unopened bottle of whiskey on the table, and two reasonably clean glasses he had borrowed from the restaurant. He motioned Wister to the chair while he opened the bottle and poured two drinks, handing one to Wister.

They drank, and then Terry sat down on the bed.

"Look here, Wister," he said. "A man don't like to talk about his personal business unless he has to. But it looks like I have to. Reckon you'd mind if I told you something about myself?"

"All right."

"First thing I want to say is that I ain't working for Circle W any more. I gave Blair my resignation a little while ago, along with a punch in the jaw that I've been owing him for a long time."

"Didn't you like the way I run things?" Wister asked evenly.

"Yes. I do. But, for that matter, up till you came, I was satisfied with the way Blair ran 'em. Then you came along, and we had that run-in with Buckner. Remember what you said after that?"

"Not particularly."

"Well, we was talking about Buckner backing down when he faced you. I had made the remark that people had just allowed that he was as hard as he acted like he was. I remember your answer. You said,

'People take a man at the value he puts on himself. He put his own price tag on himself, and people accept it as his true value.' Remember saying that?"

"No, not particularly."

"Well, them was your words, and somehow they hit me like a mule kicking me. I couldn't get 'em out of my mind. I got to thinking about 'em in connection with myself. Then I got a funny idea; I got to wonderin' if that idea wasn't just as true if you put it the other way around."

"Like what?"

"Suppose that from the time you was a kid, folks just figured you wouldn't be worth nothing, say on account of you was so ugly to look at, and maybe because your family was pretty worthless. I reckon folks would put a pretty low price tag on you. And then as you grew up, you just kind of took your own value at the price others put on you. Reckon that makes sense?"

Wister sensed the deep feeling that was running through Terry. "I don't doubt that you're absolutely right," he agreed. "And I don't doubt that there's been many a man who has, like you say, just allowed other people's poor opinion of him to convince that he was as poor a bargain as they allowed him to be. But I'll tell you one thing for sure, after a man finds out he's been holding himself too cheaply, there's no reason in the world why he shouldn't write his own price tag. Is there?"

Terry was trying to hide the depth of his concern, but he was making a poor job of it. The affairs was too vital to him.

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "After all, it's me that's living my life, not anybody else. Why should I figure that I have to be like this or that just because people figured I'd be like this or that?"

"That's a mighty sensible question," Wister smiled at him. "And I've kind of got a feeling that you know the answer. A lot of people never find it."

"I GOT my own answer all right," Terry said. "But it's this way; me, I haven't been one to think much about things like that, because I figgered I was just about what people figgered I was, which wasn't nothing much. Now you're different, and I thought maybe you'd see what I was trying to get at. Maybe you could tell me whether there was any use in me kinda changing my price tag, or whether, like they say, a leopard can't change his spots."

"Changing the color of your skin and changing your mind are two different things," Wister said. "A man can change his mind as long as he's got a mind to change. He might have a little job convincing others that he'd change it, but if he wanted to bad enough, he could convince 'em. After all, you've got to put in your time living; spend it the way *you* want to spend it, not the way others expect you to spend it."

"That's what I was thinking," Terry said. "But, like I said, I just wanted to know what you thought. I'm sure much obliged."

"Forget it," Wister said. Then he added, "I was going to ask you if you knew anything about Malone riding off at about the same time you did. But I've changed my mind. I don't suppose you'd know."

"He left us just a little while after we left you that day," Terry said. "And he didn't say where he was going. But I kind of figured I knew what was on his mind. I can read sign as good as he can."

"What do you mean?"

"That Buckner girl," Terry said. "Malone saw as clear as I did that her horse didn't throw her like she claimed. I just allowed Malone was wandering off to see if he could find out what she had up her sleeve, it being so clear that she hadn't been throwed by her horse there where she said she was."

Wister stopped in the middle of rolling a cigarette, and felt a queer sense of having been made a fool. He had not noticed any sign at all. It may have been because his mind had been on other things, but he had taken Ruby Buckner's story at its face value.

Now he believed what Terry told him. It explained Malone's absence, all right, but it left him feeling pretty disgusted with himself. He could be sticking his neck into some kind of a trap.

He studied Terry thoughtfully. "You say you're through with Blair?"

"Yep, and all the likes of him."

"Looking for work?"

"Sure. If anybody will hire me. I mean the right kind—"

"Then you've got a job. I need men."

Terry thought this over a minute. "I wasn't hoping that you'd take a chance on me," he said truthfully, "but I'd sure be glad to work for you. There's only one thing; I was playing along with Blair before now. I don't want any more to do with him, but still I don't think I'd be very proud to hit him over the head with what I know against him. It just don't seem right. Facing anybody else, if I work for Circle W, then Circle W comes first with me."

"I see what you mean about Blair," Wister agreed. "And I understand it. I reckon there'll be plenty else you can do." He got up to go.

Terry grinned. "I thought there might be," he said. "I'll see you around and ride out with you after the dance."

BALDTOP was a steep semi-circular peak rising out of the surrounding heights in a very peculiar manner. It had something of the shape of the crater of a volcano with one side blown out of it. Thus it made a natural corral with a flat floor and steep sides surrounding it except for a rather narrow entrance, which had been fenced across with barbed-wire.

In the Fall of the year it was common for ranchers on the general roundup to throw stock into this corral as they gathered it out of the mountain brush. Sometimes the animals were held here for days at a time, until this part of the hills had been combed clean. As a consequence of this use, a small cabin made of pine log had been thrown up at its mouth for the convenience of those who made the place their headquarters during the Fall roundup. The rest of the year, there was seldom a person around this deserted point.

Ed Malone had brought a gunny sack of provisions, and had kept himself hidden hereabouts so he could watch the fenced-in neck of the natural corral. And now, just after dusk on Saturday night, he was having his share of company.

Old Indian Ear Greer had come by on his mule, and had stopped off. Greer was careful to mention that he was just passing on other business, and Malone did not argue this point with him, though he knew by the old man's actions that the herb hunter had been somewhat concerned about him.

"This ain't no place for a man to lay around and invite somebody to find him," Greer had opined.

"But it is a good place for a man to lay around and find somebody else," Malone answered.

"A man could find more'n he wanted to find," Greer observed.

They built a fire and made a supper of a couple of squirrels Malone had killed. The camp was not near the cabin, but back around a high ledge of rocks where it could not be seen from the corral entrance nor the trail leading to it. Malone had not once made a fresh fire near the cabin, nor had he left any footprints near its entrance, but had kept his watch on the corral from a safe distance.

Now his patience was being rewarded. The old man, who had even sharper woods sense than Malone, leaned over from his sitting position by the fire and laid his ear to the ground.

"Somebody's comin'," he said quietly.

With one accord they used their feet to quickly extinguish the coals of their small fire, and shoved their tin coffee cups and bucket into a clump of brush. Malone spun the cylinder of his gun as they got to their feet and worked their way through the darkness under the trees to a point where they could hide within ten feet of the gate of the fence closing off the corral.

Now Malone heard the horses as they came up quickly. "Three," he said in an undertone, and Greer did not answer. In a matter of minutes three horsemen, visible only by starlight, rode into the open space and up to the gate.

The horseman in the lead said, "Cut that fence between about six posts. We've got to move fast."

Malone recognized young Rube Buckner's voice with a trace of disappointment. It was not the man he had hoped to see.

He and Greer kept their hidden positions until the two riders with Rube cut the barbed wire between the posts, leaving gaps wide enough to drive the herd out without crowding. He saw the darkness swallow them up as they went into the corral, and then he heard the shouting and cursing as the men got the cattle up and moving.

Then Malone caught Greer's arm and said in a low tone. "Let's get out of here."

He turned and the old man followed him

back into the brush for a distance that made them safe from prying ears.

Greer asked, "Do we give 'em their needin's?"

Malone had to chuckle at the excitement of the old man who had been counseling him to keep out of other people's troubles.

"I thought you wanted to keep clear of this business," he said.

"Well, this is different. Them cows belong to a friend of yours, and we've got the men right in the act of stealing them. What're we waiting for?"

"The right man," Malone answered.

"What do you mean? They're stealing them, so they're the right men,"

"This explains Ruby Buckner's game. But now I want the brains of this business."

"Who?"

"Like you said—Harmon and Blair."

"What does it matter?" the old man asked impatiently. "We've got theses thieves cornered. You ain't lettin' them get away, are you?"

"For the time being—yes," Malone answered. "We've got other work to do."

"You sound like a damned fool to me," the old man growled. "What are you thinking about?"

"This. There's only one direction Rube can take those cattle, and that's through the notch and down to Blanco or the Indian Agency past there. Here's what I want you to do; you head into town and find Jim Wister and tell him where these cattle are going, and who has got them."

"And what are you going to be doing in the meantime?"

"I'm going to wait here and catch the gent I want. Vince Harmon. I've got to prove to Wister that Vince is against him. How about you finding Wister for me?"

"I'll try," the old man said. "But it's plumb foolish to let these hombres get away when you've got the goods on 'em like this. It's bad business."

"Do it, anyway. It's Harmon I want."

"All right. And I'll drop back by to let you know how it works out."

"Or to get in on the fun," Malone laughed. "Uncle Joe, you're still an old heller. Hurry up, will you?"

Malone kept himself in his concealment and watched Rube Buckner and his two men drive the herd of cattle out of the corral and set off with them toward Blanco. Then he settled down for another long wait, convinced that this piece of thievery—a theif stealing from a thief—explained Ruby Buckner's little scheme to take Wister in tow. It answered the question that had brought him here in the first place.

WISTER walked down toward the hotel where the management furnished a "ladies parlor" for the women to freshen up before the dance. He sat around on the hotel porch a while, keeping an eye out for any possible hands he might be able to hire, and hoping to get a word with Ruby Buckner. Terry's revelation about the fake accident had left him with a conviction that there was trouble being built up for him, and that he was being set up here in town for some reason.

It was beginning to grow dark when Vince Harmon came along, apparently on his way to call for Martha Terrill. Wister called to him.

"Seen Rube Buckner?"

"Not lately," Vince answered. "Looking for him?"

"Yes," Wister said, and then under the circumstances, thought it better to explain. "Not gunning for him, though. His sister thought she and Rube and I might get together and iron out this trouble before it got too far. That's what I wanted to see him about."

"He's around somewhere," Vince answered absently. "If I see him I'll let you know."

Vince went on into the lobby of the hotel. He was satisfied that his hour had struck. He went to call for Martha. He was getting his own problem unraveled in his mind and the steps he had to take were clear to him now.

The dance was held in the second-floor hall over the general store, and it started soon after dark. The place was packed, with ranchers and grangers and their families driving in from as far as twenty miles around for the monthly occasion.

Wister made his way into the dance after it had started, waited until the first square dance was finished and a waltz started. Then he went in and tagged Ruby Buckner.

Ruby was wearing a scarlet satin gown which contrasted with her ivory skin, and

with her raven hair brought down slick over her ears, and topped with a bejeweled Spanish comb. She presented the appearance of a particularly sparkling Spanish beauty.

Would you mind dragging me around the hall for a turn or two?" Wister asked her.

Her laughter tinkled like sliver bells and her big innocent eyes were wide with a suggestion that she was just a bit fearful that Wister was too worldly a man for her to trust herself with, she hoped.

"It would be a pleasure to drag you around," she answered, going into his arms with an air of having been waiting all her life for them.

Wister danced around the hall with her, waiting for her to bring up the matter of her brother. Instead, she said, "You dance wonderfully. "We'll have to dance together some more before it's over."

"Thanks," he said dryly, "Did Rube get in?"

"Yes," she answered, snuggling up close to him. "He's around somewhere. I suppose he stopped for a hand or two of poker before putting in his appearance. He'll be along."

Somebody came along and tagged her, and Wister stepped aside. He looked over the thick crowd, found Martha Terrill dancing in Harmon's arms, and tagged her.

He should have preferred not to have seen her, not to have been forced out of courtesy to take her in his arms on the dance floor. The nearness of her hurt him too much.

Now in her eyes there was something he had never before seen; she was troubled and did not know that she was revealing the fact.

He caught a glimpse of anger on Harmon's face, but it fled as Harmon politely surrendered Martha to him. He caught the unhappy look on Martha's face, which did not fade so quickly.

"Cheer up," Wister said. "Dancing with me is worse than dancing with Vince. You've been lucky and didn't know it."

"It's not that," she said, trying to change her mood. "I wish Vince could let his business go for a while at least once a month. Oh, well—" her voice trailed off, and she made more of an effort to be congenial.

He had not danced long before someone else tagged her. She excused herself from the new partner for a moment while she spoke to Wister.

"Jim, Vince has some business to attend to later. Will you come around for another dance after a while? I can't stand always sitting in the corner and having to wait for him. It would be a favor if you would."

"Of course," Wister promised. "It's no favor, it's a pleasure."

Her new partner danced away with her and Wister stood still a long moment watching her.

Going out to have a smoke, he passed Slim Drew. He hadn't seen Drew since returning, and they had a word of greeting. Drew followed him down the outside stairs and they stopped together and rolled cigarettes. Drew had something on his mind, and finally he got around to saying it, after making a few remarks about things in general.

"Maybe I'm talking when I ought to be listening," he said. "But it's getting around pretty much that Buckner's after your hide."

"He'd rather have the hides off my stock than my own," Wister answered. "But I haven't decided yet to let him have either."

"That don't mean he won't make a try for both of 'em," Drew said. "Fact is, he's propositioned me and Chock Lewter about driving you out. We kind of stalled him off, hoping it would blow over. I just wanted to tell you that he's not dragging us in along with him."

"Much obliged," Wister said.

Drew put out his cigarette. "Going in for another grind?"

Wister found Ruby Buckner again, tagged her and danced around the hall. "You're sure Rube will be here?" he asked. "What did he think about the chances of getting the business straightened up?"

"He feels that we can work it," the girl answered. "If he isn't along soon I'll get somebody to go and find him."

IX

TUSH TERRY had never been a dancing man, and he had never been less interested in the dance than he was on this Saturday night. He milled about town restlessly, dropping into one saloon after another, taking an occasional drink but limit-

ing himself carefully. And this itself was a new and rare thing for Terry, who had formerly enjoyed pouring his whiskey down to release his anger at a world with whom he shared a mutual contempt.

But tonight the new and different Terry held no grudge against the world; he was like a man born anew at the age of thirty, having new eyes with which to look at life, with new ambition and new ideas, but with the accumulated wisdom of his past life. Now Terry felt a new and wonderful inner freedom. He felt eager, but he had the wisdom to be cautious. He was starting his new life; the golden haired bob cat was on the prowl.

He had been drifting around with an air of casualness, but he was alert, knowing as he did, that the forces allied against Wister, his new friend and boss, were on the move. And he bore the conviction that he was the only friend of Wister's who knew for certain that Harmon was playing all corners of the board. Therefore he made it his business to keep an unobtrusive eye on Harmon.

He was standing in the saloon where Blair was doing his drinking when Harmon came in and took a quick drink. He saw Harmon catch Blair's eye momentarily, and then leave the saloon. In another three minutes, Blair left the saloon.

And one minute later Terry left the saloon trailing Blair. Blair had left Squatty Marble and the kid Bud Willows at the table. Terry gave the latter no thought, but followed Blair as the ex-foreman went around back of the dance hall building and disappeared in the darkness.

Terry was behind him as close as he dared move. He made his way cautiously, guided by a hand on the dark wall of the building.

The sound of a voice halted him, the familiar voice of Vince Harmon.

"Look, Blair," Harmon said. "Here's what you'll do. . ." Harmon's voice dropped to a point where Terry could not hear any more.

Terry held his position until he heard the footsteps of both men as they rounded the other side of the building and died away. He knew something was afoot, and he did not know what it was. He cut through the back alley and entered the saloon, beating Blair back. Blair dropped into his chair, held a quiet talk with Marble and Willows, and they all got up and went out.

Terry went out of the saloon a little behind them, giving them a chance to get down the street before he emerged. They had dodged into the narrow passageway leading back from the street to the alley.

The passage, only a few feet wide, separated the saloon from another building, and it was completely dark. Terry loosened his gun in his holster and set out through the narrow passage, feeling his way over old boxes and other rubbish that slowed his progress.

Harmon returned to the dance and looked at the waltzing group until he found Wister dancing with Ruby Buckner again. He made his way through the crowd on the dance floor until he reached Wister's side, and tapped his shoulder.

Wister released Ruby, expecting Harmon to start dancing with her. Instead, Harmon said, "I've got a message for you, Jim."

The three of them walked to the edge of the dance floor where they found Ruby a chair. "This is supposed to be secret," Harmon said to Wister. "Rube Buckner wants to see you."

"Good," Wister answered. "Where is he?"

"He's out behind the livery stable. He was coming in here to see you, but he heard his old man—" Harmon gave Ruby a quick glance—"I mean, the Colonel, has come to town unexpectedly, and Rube doesn't want to bump into him until after he has his talk with you. He said go out behind the building here and walk on down to the back of the livery lot. He'll be there."

Sensing something wrong, Wister looked sharply at Ruby. Ruby was busily engaged in examining one of her fingernails, and did not look up. He believed that Harmon was innocently being used to spring the trap on him.

Wister said, "Ruby, what about this?"

Ruby looked up, her face the picture of innocence. Maybe "Rube went broke in a poker game and wants to borrow some money from you. I thought he'd be here, but at least, you'll get to see him, that way."

Wister detected something strange in her voice. He knew that whatever was on the fire was getting ready to boil. And now

he might be getting close enough to it to put his hands on it.

"All right, Vince," he said. "I'll go see what he wants."

He turned to Ruby and excused himself. He went by the checkroom and got his hat and his gun and belt and went out into the night, knowing that he was walking into trouble.

When Wister was out of sight, Ruby looked at Harmon. She saw a puncher dance up with Martha Terrill, and deliberately waited until Martha had joined them before she said what she had to say. Then she looked sharply at Harmon.

"Why did you tell Wister that Rube wanted to see him? You know he might get shot out in the dark around here."

Harmon was taken aback, but he made a great effort not to reveal the fact.

"I told him because I was asked to."

"And who asked you to?"

"Rube. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"Only one thing. Rube hasn't been in town for two hours."

Harmon's face turned pink, but he quickly forced a laugh. "I reckon I talked out of turn. I suppose Rube didn't want you to know he was still around. I should of got Wister off private to tell him."

"Yes," Ruby answered icily, "You certainly 'should of'."

She looked at the floor and came to a sudden decision. "Martha," she said, "It's stuffy in here. Let's go get some air." And before Harmon could interject a word, she added, "You needn't come with us, Vince. We'll be all right."

She steered the puzzled Martha through the crowd to the outside balcony which was empty at the moment.

"Martha," she said in a confiding voice. "I'm worried. I don't know what to do, I'm so scared."

Martha Terrill's natural sympathy came forward, and she asked, "What's the trouble, Ruby? If I can be of any help, I'd be glad to."

"It's just your advice I want. You see, Vince and I—well, I suppose you've heard the talk about us. I wish I could deny it, but I just can't. I just loved him so much that I couldn't resist him. I'm not sure, but I'm pretty sure—well, if the Colonel woke up some day and found himself to be a grandfather I don't know what he would do."

Stunned, Martha waited a long moment before she could trust her voice. "Why, I'm sure the Colonel thinks so much of you that he would not see any harm come to you," she finally said.

"I don't know," Ruby said, ready to break into tears. "But that's not all. If the Colonel knew that Vince was going to help kill Wister tonight, I don't think he'd ever let Vince come around me again."

"What?" Martha's question was explosive. "They're friends."

"Well," Ruby said, "the way Vince tells it, they caught him with the Colonel's calves the other day. They have to act to protect themselves."

"And your brother is joining in such cold- blooded murder?"

"Why, no. Rube got wind of it, and didn't want anything to do with it, so he left town two hours ago."

Now Martha was leaning against the wall, her mind in a confusion of helplessness. She had heard so much that had shocked her in the last minute or two that she was practically paralyzed with the effect of it.

"I've got to go find my father," she said. "And don't you worry. Things will come out all right. Will you excuse me now?"

And without waiting for a reply, she went back through the crowd of dancers, heading toward the cloak room, excusing herself from one man after another who wanted to dance with her.

As Martha left her, Ruby stood out on the balcony and reviewed what she had done.

She had suddenly seen something about the look on Vince Harmon's face which had convinced her that Vince was setting Wister up for a killing, and at the same time pointing the finger of guilt at her brother. Now as she saw Vince, she had got a quick flash of the picture of Vince undermining the Colonel and her brother, and walking off with Circle W and with Martha Terrill. It was this intuitive hunch which had driven her to use a partially true confession as a bomb with which to explode Vince Harmon's plans.

Upon leaving the dance hall, Wister went down the stairs, stood a moment

under the hanging lantern, then disappeared in the darkness around the side of the building. He passed through another one of the narrow passageways between buildings and came out in the dark alley behind the general store. Here he turned to his left and worked his way along the rear of the buildings heading in the general direction of the livery stable.

The row of buildings along this side of the street was built with its back to the abrupt foot of the mountain. There was an open space some two or three hundred feet wide in places which ran from the level ground to the sharp rise of the mountainside, and this had a scattering of big rock which had rolled down off the slope, and a few old abandoned wagons and other pieces of heavy junk, the whole area covered with knee-high weeds cut by a few twisting foot paths and horse trails.

In that portion of this area back of the stable, there was a horse-and-wagon lot, and it was toward this lot that Wister went alertly for his meeting with Rube Buckner.

The moon was back of the mountain, and the buildings cut off any light from the streets, leaving this area so dark that a man could barely make out the larger objects around him.

He had almost reached the slab-fenced corral back of the stable when he heard the low voice: "Wister?"

Wister stopped dead still in his tracks, crouched back against the wall of one of the buildings. He strained his eyes in the darkness to make out the location of the man who had called him. He heard the brush of a boot against weeds off to his left, and at the same time, the sound of another voice.

"That you, Wister? This is Rube."

That was a different voice, he knew, but neither was the voice of Rube Buckner. It came from a direction different from the sound of the boot against the weeds, Then Wister knew that he was boxed in against this wall.

Then he heard the first voice again. "That's him. *Let's go.*"

The voice was followed by the sudden explosion of a gun in the weeds. A bullet slugged the sandstone wall almost within arm's reach of Wister.

Wister sent a quick answering blast. The leaping tongue of flame from his own gun pin-pointed his location. Even as he jumped away, his shot brought a sudden thunder of fire from three scattered weapons.

He ignored two of the sources of that whining lead and plunged straight toward the man directly away from the building. The man out there was firing with slow steadiness, and Wister went for him, zigzagging and crouching as he moved, but swiftly closing the twenty foot space that separated their blazing guns.

The flame from his own weapon constantly revealed his changing position. The whining lead from the other two guns followed him, and so converged continuously closer on their own member. He kept going forward firing every time he caught sight of the muzzle flash ahead of him.

Now as he approached nearer to the man facing him, he heard the whining lead of the other two guns hitting something metallic and screeching off in its ricochetting flight. He remembered an old rusted-out road grader he recalled having seen here, an all metal implement which offered little protection from bullets.

His enemy suddenly became conscious of this danger from his own friends, and shouted:

"Not this way. Cut it out! Cut it out!"

In that brief instant while the man's attention was on his own shouting, Wister sprinted toward the voice, tripped over the tongue of the grader and rolled forward through the weeds, almost to the man's feet.

His attention jerked back to his danger, the man said something unintelligible and fired almost point blank at the prone Wister.

Wister lifted his gun and sent an answering blast at the man. His slug knocked a heavy grunt out of the ambusher, and then a series of grunts and groans. Then Wister heard his body go down.

The man raised his voice. "Squatty! Bud!"

Now Wister knew that it was Blair he had shot.

The other two must have read the sounds rightly, for suddenly they opened up with a fierce bombardment that sent lead raining against the old piece of road machinery. Wister lay flat on the ground and squirmed his way out of the line of fire between them.

And then instead of dying out, the rattle

of gunfire rose in intensity. Wister raised his head and saw that there were other guns in the battle. As this happened, the thudding of lead on the old grader stopped suddenly. Wister looked around, saw by the daggers of muzzle light that the men were no longer shooting directly at him, but at some newcomer in the fight.

Wister returned to the battle. He started closing in on the nearest of the two remaining ambushers. But he held his fire while that worthy was occupied.

He got to his feet and, with no effort at silence, he went directly toward that man. He was within a few feet of him when the man heard him and swung his gun around, firing once at Wister.

That was the man's mistake, for Wister was waiting for that muzzle flash to guide his next shot. He pulled his trigger, the weapon flamed. The man hit the ground and screamed once, and then lay quiet.

And at that moment, silence descended on the black patch back of the stores. The last of the ambushers no longer was shooting.

Instinctively cautious, Wister held his silence a long moment, and so did the new party in the fight. After a little while of this, he heard a voice that he recognized call his name.

"Wister? This is Terry!"

"All right, Terry. I got two of them."

"Mine took a sneak," Terry answered. "Coming toward you."

Terry came up through the weeds and asked, "You all right?"

"A couple of scratches," Wister answered. "I slid through a patch of cockleburrs is all."

"I tried to find you when I smelled this coming up," Terry said, "but I couldn't locate you in that mob."

Wister said, "Watch it while I strike a match."

While Terry stood over him with his gun in his hand, Wister dropped to one knee, struck a match and cupped it in his hand while he put the light close to the face of the man who lay at his feet.

"Squatty Marble," Terry said. "I'm not surprised."

"The other one's over here by that old road grader," Wister said, and they went over there where Wister lit another match.

"Blair," Terry said. "And now with him out of it, I reckon I won't have to call my shots from now on. I haven't got an obligation to anybody else, Wister."

"Fair enough, Terry," Wister answered. "And thanks for dropping around. You say you smelled this thing brewing?"

"Yeah," Terry answered. "But I can't say just exactly how I was sure you was going to be cornered. Anyhow, if you find out who engineered it, count me in."

Wister stood in the dark and listened to Terry's words, and there seemed to be something about the way he talked that gave Wister the idea that the man was holding something back. He felt that Terry knew more about how this business was planned than he admitted, and that he was building a wall of talk around what he knew.

"If you're thinking of Harmon," Wister said, "He gave me the message that brought me out here. But he wouldn't have knowingly helped bait this trap. He's a friend of mine."

"In that case," Terry said uncomfortably, "he'd be able to tell you who sent him with the message."

"I know who sent it. Rube Buckner did. Harmon told me so."

Terry did not answer. He knew that Rube Buckner had been gone from town at least two hours, and he knew that Harmon was not the friend that Wister thought him to be.

In the meantime, he decided to keep his mouth shut. This business of being a golden haired lion had its complications.

X

THE sound of the battle had attracted a number of men, and the vacant lot beside the livery stable was beginning to fill with them. Some were carrying lanterns they had borrowed from stores.

Wister and Terry were walking out from the back area, passing through the vacant lot between the stable and the neighboring building when they ran into the first group of men. One of them had a lantern, and by its light, Wister recognized Harmon in the group.

In answer to a chorus of questions, Wister explained briefly, telling the group no more

than that he had been ambushed by three men he had fired, that he had killed two of them and that the other had got away.

"Who was he?" someone asked. "We'll ride him down."

"Never mind," Wister answered. "I'll take care of that."

Then he called Harmon aside. If Harmon had been surprised to see Wister survive the ambush, he had had time to adjust himself to it during the talk, and now he seemed concerned for Wister's safety.

Wister asked him, "You're sure it was Rube that sent me that message?"

"Of course," Harmon answered eagerly. "I talked to him, and had a drink with him. I couldn't be mistaken about it."

Terry did a queer thing. He turned away from the two, walked about six feet to the wall of the building and gave it a kick. His hands were in his pockets, and he came back and rejoined them and stood digging at the ground with the toe of his boot. Wister noticed the tension in him and laid it to his being keyed up after the fight.

"Well, it wasn't Rube that did the shooting; it was Blair and those other men I fired. That can mean only one thing: Blair was playing along with Colonel Buckner. I am not surprised."

"It's one hell of a note when a man can't trust his own men," Harmon said. "And it's a hell of a note when Rube Buckner won't do his own shooting."

"Look here, Jim," he said. "Rube used me to bait that trap for you, and I'm not taking that lying down. What do you intend to do?"

"Find Rube Buckner," Wister said simply.

"So am I. But it's a cinch he ducked out, and is probably somewhere building up an alibi. Where are you going to look for him?"

"I haven't decided yet," Wister admitted. "Haven't had time."

"I saw one of the men he was gambling with," Harmon said. "A mountain fellow I've seen around. Don't know his name, but know where his cabin is. I'm going to play the hunch that maybe he lit out for that hombre's place. I'm going to ride out and see, anyhow."

Wister said. "No use in you having trouble on my account."

Harmon reminded him, "He made a sucker out of me, didn't he?"

Vince went back out to the street and headed down toward the dance hall, framing an excuse for leaving Martha Terrill. He was in a hurry now to get out and get those cattle moving.

He had not reached the hall when he saw the Terrill rig pull out from the hitch rack with Martha and her father in it. Old man Terrill pulled the rig to a stop and sat looking straight ahead as Harmon stepped up to Martha's side of the buggy. Martha kept her eyes on her hands as she nervously toyed with a ring.

"Look, Martha," Harmon said. "There's been some trouble. Somebody tried to dry-gulch Jim Wister. Rube Buckner got me mixed up in it, and I've got to find him and bring him to Wister. I was going to ask you if it would be all right if you went home with your father?"

Martha did not look at him as she answered.

"It's quite all right, Vince. I think that if you see anybody home, it should be Ruby."

"What do you mean?" Harmon asked suspiciously. He looked at Terrill sharply, but Terrill was still looking straight ahead.

"I don't think there's any need to go into details," she said. She pulled the ring off her finger and said, "Here. Maybe you'd better give this to Ruby. I won't have any further use for it."

Harmon held out his hand mechanically, and Martha dropped the engagement ring into it. Harmon looked at it a moment, and then at the rig as it sped down the road.

Jim Wister and Terry came out onto the street from the vacant lot and set out in search of Rube Buckner. They saw Harmon just as he mounted his horse at one of the racks and headed out of town at the far end of the street, but they found no trace of Rube Buckner in the two saloons in which they inquired. Nobdy had seen Rube since sundown when he had ridden out of town.

"Rube must have swallowed himself," Terry commented. "He couldn't have sent that word by Harmon if he was not around to do it."

"He came back into town for some reason," Wister said. "Otherwise Harmon wouldn't have seen him."

They were headed toward a house where they heard there was a poker game going on, when a man stepped out of the darkness and confronted them. Terry laid his hand on his gun, but Wister caught his wrist.

Wister said to the man, "Howdy, Mr. Greer. Looking for me?"

"Yes, I was," answered old Indian Ear Greer. He peered up and down the darkened street, then took a brief glance at Terry, whom he did not know. "I'd hoped to get a word with you."

Wister excused himself from Terry, who walked on out of hearing and waited. Greer took another suspicious look up and down the street, then said in a voice that would not have carried six feet.

"I got a message from Ed Malone for you. It's right important."

"Where is Ed?" Wister asked.

"He's still busy," the man said evasively. "Here's what he said tell you. There's a bunch of your stock being drove over the notch to Blanco tonight. Three men driving 'em, and you probably won't be able to catch up with them by now, but you can probably find the men resting up in Blanco, and spending your money. Malone reckoned you'd want to get your money for your stock."

"Yeah?" Wister asked. "But I'd have to know who to find to get it."

"Rube Buckner and them two hands that work with Blair on your own place."

Wister called Terry over and introduced him. "This is a friend of mine, Mr. Greer, and he'll be with me." Then he repeated to Terry the story Greer had told him.

Terry observed, "If Rube has got that much of a start with them cattle, we can't catch him before he gets rid of them. But it proves how puzzling it is how Rube could be driving them cattle, and at the same time be in Oxbow sending Harmon to get you, don't it?"

Wister said, "We'll get the answer to that one. You've just got your back up against Harmon." He turned back to Greer, "You going back to where Ed is?"

"Sooner or later," Greer said with his usual caution.

"Tell him I'm heading for Blanco, then. Wonder why he didn't come and tell me this business himself?"

"I reckon he figures that if he lays low where he is, he'll get the man he wants. It seems he figgers that the men who are driving the cattle ain't the main ones."

The old mountaineer melted into the darkness as suddenly as he had appeared. Wister and Terry stood still a moment, then Terry said:

"Like I told you before, a man don't want to admit knowing a lot of things he'd be better off if he didn't know. Still and all, I think if we'd just go to Blanco and wait, chances are that Buckner and them boys will come riding in from somewhere in the direction of the Indian Agency, and Buckner is likely to have his pockets full of money. Like I say, that's just a guess. I wouldn't know anything for sure."

Wister laughed at him, and then Terry laughed with him, and they went and got their horses and headed out into the mountain road in the direction of the notch through which passed the trail to Blanco.

IT WAS about midnight when Ed Malone, lying half asleep in the brush outside the now-empty corral at Baldtop, jerked up alertly and listened. He identified the sound which had aroused him from half-consciousness as that of a lone horseman approaching.

He got to his feet, made his way through the brush to the point where it ran down to the cabin and the corral entrance. Hiding on the darkest side of the cabin, he awaited the approaching horseman.

He saw the figure loom up in the starlight, pull up to the cabin and slide down off his horse. The man went into the cabin a moment, struck a match, then came back out and sat down on a stump in front of the door while he rolled a cigarette.

Malone rounded the cabin and approached the man with his gun drawn. He got to the man and put his gun in the man's back.

"Just keep both hands on your makings," he ordered.

The man froze. It was Bud Willows, the youth who had flunkied around Circle W for Blair.

He heard the tremulous voice of the flunky whining, "What's the matter? What

you holdin' me up for? I ain't got anything."

"I want to know what you're doing here?" Malone demanded.

"Nothing. I got a right to come here if I want to."

"Maybe you have. I want to know who you're waiting here for?"

"Nobody! I just felt like taking a ride. Anything wrong in that?"

"There probably is. Where'd you come from?"

"The ranch."

"Where's Blair and the rest of your bunch?"

The boy was silent a moment, then answered sullenly, "I don't know."

"You know, all right, and you're going to answer my questions."

"I don't have to answer no questions."

"That's a matter of opinion," Malone answered quietly. He whipped his gun barrel around suddenly and slapped the youth across the side of the head with it. Willows fell to the ground with a yelp.

"Now get to your feet," Malone ordered. "And do what I tell you after this. Start walking straight ahead."

The youth was thoroughly cowed, and he went forward under Malone's direction. Malone got him to where his saddle was hidden, and getting a rope, tied his hands behind him and made him fast with his back to a tree.

He had hardly finished making the youth secure when he heard a step, and old Greer appeared with miraculous silence beside him.

Greer did not say anything, but went over to the youth and peered at his face.

"Who's he?" he asked Malone.

"One of Blair's polecats. He showed up here to meet somebody, I suppose. I'm going to make him talk before I'm through with him."

Greer caught Malone by the sleeve and led him back out of earshot to make his report. "Things was happening in town," he said.

"What was happening?" Malone asked. "Did you see Wister?"

"Yeah, I seen him. That was after he had killed Blair and another one of his crew that he had fired this morning. The three of them got him in a corner and tried to drygulch him. Only one of them got away, and it might have been this punk."

"I reckon it could be."

"Fact is, in all the milling around after the shooting, I accidentally learned a few things. First place, I seen Harmon and Wister talking, just as friendly as you please. Wister must not know that Harmon is against him."

"He doesn't," Malone said. "That's why I'm here—waiting for Harmon."

"Why don't you tell Wister, and let him take care of Harmon?"

"Did you ever try to tell a man that his friend was cutting his throat? Wister will lean over backwards to be fair to Harmon, because he used to go with Martha Terrill."

Old Greer said. "Well, Harmon had a talk with that Terrill girl. I wasn't too close, but I overheard some of what was said. She bawled him out and broke her engagement with him. I heard that much."

"All accidental," Malone chuckled. "What else did you learn accidental?"

"Well, when that was over, Harmon gets on his horse and lights out this way. I took a shortcut, figuring I could beat him here."

Malone said, "I wish I could get that punk to talk."

"You stay here and let me have a little talk with the lad," Uncle Joe answered. "I've picked up a few scraps of things from the Indians in my day."

Malone waited while old Greer went back to where the youth was tied to his tree. After a while Greer called Malone.

"Harmon is coming out to drive that stock to Blanco," Greer said. "The kid came to join up with him, Blair being dead."

Malone was pacing the ground before the youth who was still tied with his back to a tree. Then he came to a quick decision.

"Now I've got a chance to do what I want to do," he said to the old man. "I'm going to get Harmon with his pants down."

He turned to Bud Willows and pointed a finger under the youth's nose. "Now, listen here. If you want a chance to save your hide, here it is. I'm going to turn you loose and let you sit on that stump in front of that cabin when Harmon comes up. Your job is to go through exactly what you would have done if I hadn't

caught you. You tell him about Blair and Squatty getting killed, and ask to join up with him. He's going to see that the cattle are gone from this corral, and he'll ask if you know anything about it. You tell him that Rube Buckner and those other two men from Circle W were just driving them away when you came up. Tell him you'll be willing to help him get them back. Understand?"

"Yeah," the youth agreed sullenly. "I'll do it."

"If you don't, you won't live to see the sun rise. I'll be back in the dark of that cabin with a gun covering you. If you say a word or make a gesture to tip him off the first bullet is for you. Understand?"

THE youth was sitting on the stump in front of the cabin, his horse and himself barely visible by starlight when Harmon rode up and pulled his horse to a stop. Harmon had drawn his gun as he approached the figure, and the youth, seeing it, called out, "It's me, Mr. Harmon. Bud Willows."

"What are you doing here?" Harmon asked.

"Blair's dead, and Squatty's dead. I came on out like you said to do, to help you drive the cattle over to Blanco."

"All right," Harmon said impatiently. "I should have taken care of Wister myself. Well, let's get that stock moving."

"There ain't no stock," the youth answered.

"Why?"

"Rube done drove it off."

Harmon considered a moment. Landseer had told him that Rube was after it. "That will just make it easier for us," he said.

"How?" the youth asked.

"We're going to Blanco and wait for young Buckner to sell that stock at the Indian Agency, and then we're going to collect our money from him. Think you've got guts enough to give me a hand?"

"I sure have. Just give me a chance at it."

"All right, get your horse and we'll get going."

The youth was moving toward his horse when Malone emerged from the trees. He said quietly. "I want a talk with you, Vince." He had his hand on his gun butt.

Harmon let his right hand go to his saddle horn and sat waiting. The youth had reached his own horse, and now sprung into the saddle. Malone barked a warning to him. "Hold it, Bud."

The youth sat his saddle and did not attempt to get the horse moving. Malone walked over and stopped beside Harmon's horse. His voice had a great weariness in it.

Harmon looked down at Malone standing in the darkness, and stiffened in his saddle. Malone sensed his movement, and knew that Harmon had already realized that he had walked into a trap and had revealed his hand past the possibility of redemption.

Harmon said, "What are you doing out here, Ed? Lost?"

"I wish to hell I was. But I came out here to meet you."

"Meet me?"

"Let's don't make this any tougher than it is, Vince. I'm doing this because I don't want Wister to realize what a dirty skunk he called friend. I came here to kill you, but I reckon I can't. There's the memory of too many campfires with the three of us sitting around 'em, too many good times. They'd all come back to haunt me. Vince, how the hell can a white man get so hungry for a dollar that he'd doublecross his friends to get it? I just don't understand it. I can't make it out."

Vince Harmon sat his horse rigidly, his hand clamping the saddle horn.

"What are you getting at, Ed? You talk like I've turned skunk or something. Where'd you get that idea?"

"Oh, shut up, Vince, and ride off before I put a bullet in you! Damn it, you've been turning crooked in little ways ever since you started hitting Landseer's poker game too hard. And then, stealing Jim's cattle. And now, tonight—setting Jim up for Blair and his coyotes to take pot shots at. Don't waste time trying to lie to me, Vince. Turn your horse and head out of here in any direction you want to, except toward Blanco, and don't come back. And get going, before I get disgusted enough to do the thing I ought to do."

Harmon looked around at Bud Willows, and then he knew for certain that he had reached a turning point. He had no choice now—there was only one way to escape destruction.

"So, that white-livered punk ran off at the mouth, did he?" Vince said. "All right, Ed, I'll pull out, but I want to tell this son a thing or two—"

He lifted his reins and turned his horse around so that the animal faced the trail. He dug his spurs into the horse, and with his right hand hidden from Malone, he pulled his weapon and fired two quick shots.

The first shot was aimed at Malone, and it caught him by surprise. The hand Malone had dropped to his gun never came out with it, for Harmon's unexpected shot caught him square in the chest and knocked him to the ground.

Ed Malone died as he fell.

The second shot hit Bud Willows and silenced him forever as a witness. The horse bolted and hit for the woods as Willows' body tumbled to the ground and rolled until it hit the stump he had formerly sat on.

Vince Harmon's horse was in a dead run for the pitch-black trail, and just as he disappeared into it, three rifle shots rang out behind him. None of them came near him, for Bud Willows' horse had been running between Harmon's horse and old Uncle Joe Greer, who had come tearing out of the woods with his rifle blazing.

The mountaineer cursed the bad luck that put Willows' horse between him and Harmon until the complete darkness swallowed Harmon up.

As the sound of Harmon's horse died in the woods, the old man came to Ed Malone's body and squatted on his haunches beside it. When he found that his distant nephew and the only remaining man of his blood was dead, he did not move, but sat on his bootheels for a long time.

Then he said to the dead Ed Malone, "Well, I told you, kid, you shouldn't mix in other men's affairs. But allowin' Wister was a friend o' yours, I reckon there is worse ways to die."

He went to his mule and got the shovel he always carried for digging ginsing roots, and came back to perform his duty toward his last kinsman.

"Now, I'm in it," he kept repeating to himself. "How'd I get mixed up in this business?"

The silence of Baldtop was unbroken the rest of the night, save for the lonely cry of the hoot owl and the sound of the old man's shovel in the dirt.

XI

RUBE BUCKNER and two others sat around a square pine table in the eating house at Blanco, trying to control their appetites with whiskey until breakfast came. One of the pair demanded the hundred dollars Rube had promised him for the night's work. Wister's cattle had been sold and paid for.

"Right on the barrel head," Rube answered, pulling out the big roll of bills. "When I promise a man money, he gets it on the dot."

"Not my money, Rube," came a voice from the kitchen door. "I'll take it, myself."

Rube looked up to see Jim Wister just inside the door, and Terry beside him with a white-toothed smile.

The room was of fairly large dimensions, with four or five tables that were used for food at mealtimes and for card games the rest of the time. A bar ran across the rear wall, with the old proprietor leaning sleepily behind it. Buckner and his two men sat at a table a dozen feet away from the bar.

After Wister spoke, there was a sudden silence in the room, broken only by the sizzling sound of meat frying in the kitchen just behind the bar. Then one of the men who had been sitting with his chair leaned back against the wall sat up straight, the sound of the chair legs thumping on the pine floor. Those were the only sounds for a long moment.

Buckner looked down at the whiskey glass in his right hand, made wet rings on the table top with it. He was thinking hard while Wister watched him cautiously. There was no fear in the reckless young Buckner, and there was no question in his mind that he had a killing to do. There was no sense of guilt in him, for he had lived on the theory that whatever he did was right because it suited him to do it. If he stepped on another man's toes, that was the other man's hard luck. If he got in a fight, he got out of it with the means at hand.

Wister watched the young Buckner and read these things in him. And he read

something more; Buckner was not displeased at this turn of affairs. And Wister knew the reason for this; it was not the matter of this little batch of cattle, it was the matter of the whole fight for Circle W. Buckner was seeing that to kill Wister now would solve more than the immediate problem. And the fact that Wister had the drop on him was merely a minor factor to be overcome.

Buckner sat and planned his move, quietly composed.

Buckner took his hand off the whiskey glass and picked up the sheaf of bills, and as he did this he got to his feet and walked across the room and leaned against the bar, still holding the money in his hand.

"What makes you think this is your money?" he asked after the long silence.

"It came from the sale of my cows, stuff you drove off of Baldtop during the night."

"I was just wondering," Buckner said apparently satisfied, "whether you were just guessing, or knew what you were talking about. Maybe you hadn't heard—or didn't believe—that there ain't any more Circle W."

"Maybe you hadn't heard—or didn't believe—that there will be a Circle W as long as I'm above ground," Wister answered. "Do you want to hand over that money, or do I take it off your dead body?"

Rube Buckner laughed, playing his hand for all it was worth. He laid the money down on the bar in a tall stack, and stepped back from it, and looked at it thoughtfully.

"There it is, friend. A big pile of it. Help yourself—if you can."

Then Rube Buckner started backing away from the money, backing toward the wall, but keeping his eyes glued on Wister. He had a faint smile around the corners of his mouth, but there was a tautness in the muscles under the skin of his face and around his eyes, and there was a wound-up tightness about his body as he backed away, but ready to spring into action at Wister's first move.

Wister said, "All right, Rube, if that's the way you want it. Start shooting when you're ready!"

Buckner's play had been for the purpose of drawing attention to his little act with the money, thus getting Wister's and Terry's eyes off his two companions, so that one or both of them could get a sneak shot at Wister.

Buckner's men knew this, and the first one got his gun out of its pouch in a gesture hidden by the table. And now as Wister started his short, well-balanced steps toward the money, with his eyes fastened on Buckner, the man at the table suddenly lifted his gun and tightened his finger on the trigger.

He did not finish pulling that trigger, for Terry shot him just as his gun came up. The force of the slug slammed him, chair and all, over backward—

—and blew the room apart with the sudden explosion of the other guns!

Terry's refusal to have his attention diverted from the men he was watching, broke up the whipsaw play—and threw the room into action.

Rube Buckner's gun and Jim Wister's gun came out of their pouches almost in unison, and the shots from both weapons blended almost as one shot, so closely together were they fired.

WISTER went down from the force of Buckner's bullet grazing his rib and plowing up three inches of flesh. He hit the floor on his back and rolled over without stopping his motion.

Rube Buckner's body had jerked as Wister's lead went through his chest, but he had grabbed onto the bar and was still on his feet, his face frozen in shocked surprise. He braced himself on unsteady legs, clawed at his chest with his left hand —and lifted his pistol again with his right. He shot twice more at Wister as Wister rolled on the floor, but his weight, weaving on his unsteady legs, threw his shots astray.

Then one of Buckner's legs buckled; he dropped his gun and spun around part way and clutched to the bar with both hands in an effort to remain standing. The other leg bent at the knee, and he let himself down to a kind of awkward sitting position facing the bar. His hands slid off the bar's edge, his arms dropped tiredly to his lap and he lay over on his side with his legs doubled up almost to his chin. Suddenly his legs straightened out in a kicking motion, he rolled over on his back, and a few pink bubbles grew out of his mouth. And then

he lay still.

While Wister was trying to get back to his feet, the man Terry had shot crawled out from under the table behind which he had fallen, and shoved the table over on its side. The whiskey bottle and glasses rolled off onto the floor, the bottle breaking, the glasses rolling away. The man was behind the table, while his partner showed up ten feet away, turning over another table.

Terry had his smoking gun in his hand, and there was a broad smile on his face which showed the even rows of his teeth. And then with the white-toothed smile never leaving his face, he started walking squarely at the first man behind the table.

Lead whined all around Terry, coming from behind both tables, but Terry gave it no more attention than he would have given horse flies in a stable. He kept walking into the fire of the first man, and when he got to that table he lifted his heavy foot and shoved the table away with one push of his boot. Then he shot the man dead. The man fell heavily in the broken glass of the whiskey bottle.

Then Terry turned toward the man behind the table in the corner, and he walked into his fire until the man, hearing no return shots, stuck his head up over the table edge to see where his enemy was. Terry took one snap shot at him and blew a hole in his forehead.

Then, satisfied that his pair was finished off, he turned and found Wister groggy but on his feet, walking toward the money on the bar. The left side of Wister's shirt was bright with blood.

"Hurt bad?" Terry asked, showing his concern.

"Just a heavy crease, I think," Wister answered. "Dug up some flesh and might have busted a rib, but it's not too bad, I reckon."

Terry set to work with fast and expert hands. He took off Wister's shirt and as he worked, he spoke sharply to the old proprietor who had crouched in the corner back of his bar and had been stunned into immobility with fear.

"Get me a cup of flour," Terry ordered, "and bring me one of your pillow cases—a half way clean one."

The old man was too frightened to put up an argument, and quickly brought the flour and cloth. Terry packed the flour on the wound to stop the bleeding, and tore the pillow case into strips which he wrapped around Wister's body to hold the flour in place.

"Now we're getting out of here," Terry said. "It'll take most of the day to get home at the rate you'll have to travel. Here, I'll give you a hand."

Wister said, "Wait a minute."

He pulled the package of money out of his pocket, and found a folded paper which had been with it. He opened it and saw the duplicate of a Government Purchase Order, with Vincent Harmon's name signed at the bottom of it. Terry, looking over his shoulder, saw it, and observed Wister carefully, but Wister's face was inscrutable.

"It proves one thing, don't it?" Terry said.

"What does?"

"Finding Rube here."

"What does that prove?"

"How could Buckner have got them cattle over to the Indian Agency and sold them, and been back here by now, if he was in Oxbow last night when Harmon said he wanted to see you? He couldn't have been in Oxbow when Harmon said he was, and had time to drive them cattle. Therefore he didn't send the message Harmon said he sent you."

Wister looked strangely at Terry. "First it was Malone, and now it is you. You've both been trying to tell me that Harmon is crooked. You've been hinting at that all along. I just don't believe it. I've known him too long. Rube just used his name in selling that stock.

"But you haven't known Harmon lately," Terry said. "You've been gone a long time."

"You can't change a leopard's spots," Wister said. "Harmon was honest."

Terry let a smile crack his lips. "You can't chnage a leopard's spots, because he was born with 'em, but you can change his habits. The way a man lives is not something he was born with; it's a set of habits he's adopted, and he can change 'em. I don't know much, but that is one thing I do know. I learned that from you."

"Yes," Wister said, "I guess you do know that. But that doesn't prove that Vince is a crook. How could you prove that?"

"I wouldn't try to prove it to you,"

Terry said with finality. "There are some things a man has to see with his own eyes. But you can be trying to figure out whether anybody at all could have sent Harmon to lead you into that trap. It could have been Colonel Buckner. If nobody sent him, then he must have done it on his own. But either way, he's still the lad that did the trick."

"I just don't believe it. I can't believe it."

They went out to their horses and Terry helped Wister aboard. They set out on their ride home, but it was painful business to Wister, and now it was apparent to him that the lead had broken one of his ribs. They took it at a slow walk.

VINCE HARMON rode in the direction of Blanco. He kept off the main trail, but rode through the trees alongside it.

He was bitter at Landseer, for the gambler had made it necessary for him to quickly dig up a mere thousand dollars to settle a gambling debt, thus diverting his attention from his bigger deal which he expected to net him thousands as soon as he got his hands on Circle W, and to lead him to eventual control of the whole section of the country. He intended to make Landseer pay dearly for this as soon as he got power enough.

Riding thus, reviewing the events of the recent hours, he saw that with Blair dead, and with Malone and the Willows youth having had their mouths sealed with lead, he was still in the driver's seat. His hand was being forced; but he would have had to kill Rube Buckner sooner or later anyway, and so he might as well get that chore finished while he was retrieving the money to pay Landseer. That would kill two birds with one stone. And the best way to do that was simply to waylay them from the concealment of the trees.

He rode on to Blanco without seeing sign of the Buckner party, and stopped off at the saloon. He walked into the place and saw it in a shambles, with three dead men lying on the floor, and the old proprietor still too stunned from shock to have done anything about getting rid of the bodies.

Rube Buckner lay on his side in front of the bar, and Harmon stood over him with a sinking heart.

"Who killed him?" Harmon barked at the proprietor.

"I don't know their names. A couple of fellers. One named Jim, and another one with a lot of teeth."

"Heavy yellow-haired fellow with white teeth? and a slender medium-sized man in a blue shirt?"

"The same," the old man answered. "Taken quite a wad of money off this here'n. Road agents, I reckon, but their faces was new to me, though the big one had something familiar about him."

Harmon ordered a bottle and drank one deep drink after another. Wister and Terry had beat him to that money, he knew, and there wasn't a chance to get his hands on it. And Landseer would accept no excuses. Harmon racked his brain to dig up an idea that would save his hide, and he settled on the only possible way out.

He had to drag Colonel Buckner into this, to get his help and wipe Wister out quickly, then he had to turn on Buckner and wipe him out, and stand secure in possession of Circle W. There were enough cows left on Circle W to settle with Landseer, and leave enough over to go on with his expansion program.

He looked down at the dead Rube Buckner, and speculated on the Colonel's reaction to the news of his son's death. Then he took Rube's body out and lashed it onto Rube's horse, and set out toward Buckner's to deliver it, and to report that Wister had killed him. He knew that the sight of his dead son would throw the Colonel into a murderous rage.

JIM WISTER and Terry had made slow progress down the mountain trail; they had kept their horses at a walk, but still the bleeding and the pain of his wound had drained so much of Wister's strength that they had to stop for frequent rests along the wooded road.

It was late in the afternoon when a figure came out of the brush and waited on the trail ahead of them, and when they rode up, Wister saw the form of old Indian Ear Greer sitting rigidly atop his black mule, the man's legs so long that they almost touched the ground. They stopped as they approached the old man.

Greer, in his slow and devious way, opined that the weather was hot.

Terry, impatient to be moving, asked, "Old man, you know a lot about Indian remedies. Wister's got a gunshot wound in his side. Got any ideas?"

"I might be able to draw the fever out of it," Greer said. He slid off his mule. "There's a spring back there a hundred feet or so. Get a hatful of water and get the wound cleaned."

With that he disappeared back into the woods, and when Terry returned with the water, the old man was pounding a handful of green leaves between two stones. In a few minutes the two of them had got Wister off his horse and applied the poultice of pounded leaves.

"Won't set that cracked rib," the old man said, "but it will keep the wound from getting infected, and take the fever out of it."

Terry was about to help Wister back onto his horse when the old man made a statement, as if it had just come to him.

"Ed won't be back," Greer said bluntly.

Wister looked sharply at him. "Why?" he asked.

"Vince Harmon shot him dead last night, up at Baldtop."

Wister leaned against his saddle as the stunning news seemed to drain his remaining strength from him.

He took a long weary breath, then asked, "What happened?"

"When I told Ed that it was Harmon and Blair collecting Circle W cattle at Baldtop and driving them over to the Indian Agency, Ed set up camp there to catch Harmon. Buckner beat Harmon to the cattle last night, but when Harmon got up there, Ed had it out with him. Ed give him a chance to leave the country—Ed always was too soft-hearted for his own good—and Harmon thanked him by shooting him dead. He got away before I got a good shot at him. I buried Ed at Baldtop. Thought you'd like to know."

"Thanks," Wister said vaguely. There were things about this business which he still did not understand. Like Malone trying to save him from the knowledge of Harmon's treachery, and dying for his trouble. It left a man wondering about the nature of people.

"How was it that you didn't mention Harmon when you told me in town about Buckner taking that herd? You didn't say then that Harmon had driven it there."

"That wasn't my idea," old Greer said quickly. "I told Ed I'd have killed the whole bunch of them, or not got into it at all. Ed was set on keeping you from knowing your friend was doublecrossing you. And that cost Ed his life."

"Yes," Wister said. "It's my fault, I reckon. If I'd listened to what Ed and Terry were trying to tell me, it wouldn't have happened." He took a deep breath. "Well, I'll have to look Harmon up."

"Needn't to," Old Greer said gruffly. "I'll do it."

Terry got Wister back onto his horse, and they set out on the last few miles of their trip, old Greer on his mule, falling in with them and riding along.

The poultice had a refreshing effect on Wister's side, but the news about Harmon dragged his spirits down until he felt as though he were completely whipped. His blindness up to now had resulted in Malone's death, and now that he could no longer escape knowledge of the truth about Harmon, he was in no better shape. Harmon was Martha Terrill's intended husband, and no matter what Harmon deserved, he knew that he could not bring himself to do her the hurt of killing the man she loved.

On the other hand he had killed Blair, the man who had given Circle W a bad name. Now he was alone except for Terry, who was proving a good friend. He was wounded, and had no crew with which to fight Colonel Buckner any further.

He was not a man to give up a fight, but he asked himself now whether he had any reason for fighting over a piece of land. Having a home without Martha Terrill in it meant worse than no home at all to him; being near Martha Terrill married to Vince Harmon would be a still more bitter pill to swallow. Adding it up, he suddenly decided that he had nothing here that he wanted to fight for.

"Tell you what, Terry. I'm not going to stop at the ranch. I'll go on to town and get a doctor to patch me up, and then I'll hit off for Texas. If you want to stay and try to make a ranch out of Circle W, it's yours. Be a good chance for you to get off on the right foot."

Terry looked at him sharply, and showed

his puzzlement at Wister's signs of weakening. Then he knew that Wister was going through the darkest moment of his life, and he was seeing what friendship—and its disruption—could mean to a man with a whole heart. To Terry, this was a profound and revealing experience, and a lesson which burned into him with white and purifying flame.

"Mighty kind of you, Jim," he said. "But I don't think I'll take you up on that just yet. Me, I don't think I'd want to run a ranch anyway. I'll be satisfied to do the work and let the other men have the worries." He tried to pass the offer off lightly.

Wister knew he was lying, but he didn't care. He was in too low a mood at the moment. The sudden realization of the treachery of a friend can lay a man lower than a bullet, and Wister felt that low at the moment.

They reached the fork of the trails about two hours before sundown, and it was Wister's intention to ride right on to town instead of taking the trail to his right which led through the woods to his house.

The sound of intermittent gunfire halted Wister, Terry and old Greer, who was trailing along behind them at the intersection of the Circle W lane with the road.

"That shooting is at Circle W," Terry said. "Wonder who's there?"

The sound of gunfire was to Wister the same as it would have been to any old peace officer; it coursed through his blood; it drove away all thought of abandoning the fight. Somebody was attacking Circle W—his ranch—

"But who the hell is defending it?" he puzzled aloud. "There's nobody supposed to be there."

"The wolves fighting over the carcass, I reckon." Terry said. "Do we fight or run?" He deliberately asked the question bluntly in hope of arousing Wister's sagging spirits.

For answer, Jim Wister turned his horse into the tree-lined trail leading to Circle W. Terry came along beside him, old Greer still trailing along on his mule.

The woods ran to within fifty yards of Wister's house which sat in a clearing, surrounded by trees on the three upper sides. The barns, bunkhouse, and outbuildings were in the open space on the lower side which sloped down and spread out into the grazing land in the flats.

AS WISTER and Terry drew nearer the house, the sound of the firing became louder, echoing through the trees, its thunder bouncing back and forth between the near hillsides. They were less than two hundred yards from the opening clearing around the house when Wister pulled his horse up to a stop, and the others stopped with him.

"I'm going to have a look," he said, sliding off his animal. "It sounds like somebody has got somebody else pinned down in the house."

Terry slid off his animal. "I'll go along," he volunteered.

Both men checked their guns and filled the empty chambers on which they carried their hammers. They melted into the trees and worked their way toward the sound of firing. Wister was walking bent over to favor his wounded side, grasping at trees he passed for support.

Coming near to the edge of the clearing, Wister's eyes swept the whole of the open ground.

"Five horses there in the corral," he stopped in midspeech, and then his voice took on a tone of incredulity— "That black and white paint; that's Martha Terrill's pony! I can't figure—"

"Maybe somebody brought her here for some reason. Harmon—"

"I don't know," Wister admitted, still filled with puzzlement.

"Watch it!" Terry said briskly. "Coming up behind the barn."

Colonel Buckner, on his big black stallion, was leading three other horsemen up to the hay barn, riding with the barn protecting them from the house. The Colonel sat his horse, gesticulating and bellowing orders. Two of the horsemen dismounted with gunny sacks in their hands and ran to two separate points along the wall of the barn.

Wister saw them lay their sacks on the ground at the foot of the barn and take bottles out of their pocket and start pouring the contents, probably coal oil, onto the sacks.

"Fixing to burn it," Wister said tightly. "I'll take the one on the right."

Terry's gun was already out, and their shots rang out at almost the same moment. Wister's man started crawling back toward the woods, dragging one leg.

Colonel Buckner let out a roar of profanity and jerked his horse around, spurring him back to the trees, followed by two quick shots from Wister and Terry.

"So that's it," Wister said. "Buckner knows our shots didn't come from the house, so we'd better be moving."

"Which way?"

"Buckner's boys are scattered in the trees all around the house. I guess that means we'll have to flush 'em out. There's a million of 'em."

Afoot, Terry went one way, and Wister went the other, working his way through the trees to the nearest point from which he heard firing. In the distance he could hear the bellowing of Colonel Buckner's voice rallying his men somewhere in the woods on the other side of the house.

Wister continued working through trees, sapling, brush and pipes two feet through their trunks, and came close upon the sound of steady rifle fire. He lifted his gun as he went forward, the jolting pain of his broken rib forcing him to move slowly.

Then he spotted a man in a thicket, his body and rifle hidden in the greenery of a clump of buckbrush at the very edge of the clearing. Wister lifted his sixgun, thumbed the hammer back and started to fire.

The man, hearing the click of Wister's hammer, looked around. It was Vince Harmon—and Wister had him under his sights.

They faced each other, with gunfire in the background.

Harmon and Wister looked at each other through a long, silent moment, then Harmon broke his gaze and looked around quickly. He backed out of the brush and got to his feet, his rifle in his hand at his side. He looked at a big tree four feet from where he stood, measuring the distance with his eyes.

"Hold it, Vince," Wister said. "I want to talk to you."

Harmon's face had new hard lines in it; his lips were thin and tight against his teeth, and a peculiar fire burned in his eyes. Wister felt the bitter antagonism in the man; he could almost see the tautness come to Harmon's muscles in readiness for action.

Harmon answered, the violence in him coloring his words. "Well, what's on your mind?"

"Malone, Vince, lying up there at Baldtop with a bullet in him. That's what's on my mind. How does it feel, Vince, to see your friends lying dead with your bullets in them? Malone was my friend, too. What do you think I ought to do about it?"

Wister did not speak loudly. He had no more feeling of friendship for Vince Harmon; that was a dead thing, but still Harmon was tied up in his life. They'd had their fun together; Martha loved Harmon, and he—Wister—loved Martha. Their lives would never become untangled.

He watched the play of emotions on Harmon's face, the cunning which rested there for a moment, then the doubt, then the slow draining away of his self-assurance in the presence of the gun trained on him, in the presence of the man who stood before him and saw him for what he was. Whatever it was working inside Vince Harmon, whatever remnant of his self-esteem was left, it was tearing him to pieces, and the wrecking of him was visible on his face.

The crack up came upon Harmon suddenly.

It made him spin on his feet and jump for the protection of the big tree he had spotted a moment before. Wister raised his gun, tensed the muscles of his hand as the sights of the gun lined up on Harmon's back—

—and then he could not pull the trigger!

It was as though Martha had laid a hand on his shoulder and pleaded, "Don't, Jim. It would always stand between us."

Harmon disappeared in the thickness of the woods, and the sound of his footsteps was lost in the larger booming of guns. Wister stood leaning against a sapling for a long moment, shaken, not knowing why he had stilled his trigger finger. He closed his eyes while a great wave of pain flooded through him.

Then in the clearing there was a sudden concentration of pistol shots blending with the deeper roar of rifles.

WISTER moved to the edge of the clearing and saw what was happening. Colonel Buckner had brought all his men together, and now they had suddenly charged out of the woods toward the house.

A hundred yards away, Terry had run out into the clearing and dropped behind a big pine stump. He was pouring lead into the onrushing riders, while more lead was coming at them from the windows of the house. A horse reared and screeched, his rider fell off him, and the animal trampled him in his panicky efforts to escape. Another horse went down, rolling over on his rider; still another rider went out of his saddle, his foot catching in the stirrup while the horse dragged him bouncing over the stumpy ground. The air was churned with the yells of men and the rattle of gunfire.

Colonel Buckner was in the lead, and he spotted Terry behind his stump. He waved over his shoulder at his men and turned his horse toward Terry. Terry shot down two more of Buckner's riders.

Wister was walking along the edge of the clearning now, having to support himself from tree to tree, but pushing toward Terry as fast as his weakened condition would allow. He stopped dead still now and then to pick off a man who was getting too close to Terry, and then continued his painful forward motion. The trees were beginning to dance before his eyes; the ground began to rock. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve and pushed himself forward by force of determination alone.

The withering fire from the house and from Terry, weakened the will of the remaining half dozen of Buckner's riders, and the yelling mass of them gave way under it, and turned their plunging and milling horses, pushing them frantically toward the protection of the woods.

Wister saw the front door of his house fly open now, and he recognized Slim Drew as he came running out with his rifle under his arm. Two men he did not recognize followed Drew out, and the three scattered and added their lead to the angry hornet's song of bullets already flying. Buckner's men faded into the woods at breakneck speed.

Colonel Buckner pulled his horse up, turned him, stood up in his saddle and raised his pistol. He fired carefully and killed one of the men who had come out of the house. Then he raised his pistol and was bringing it down on Slim Drew.

Wister shouted at him, got his attention and halted his aim.

"Right over here, Colonel," he said. "I'm the man you're looking for! I'm the man that killed Rube."

Buckner turned his head around and sighted Wister. Wister was close enough to see the Colonel's face grow a bright red.

The Colonel roared, "Yeah," and slid off his horse.

Then the Colonel started moving toward Wister. He gradually quickened his pace until he was almost running. And even as he ran, he lifted his pistol and threw two hurried shots at Wister. The bullets whistled by Wister's head, but the Colonel's hurry ruined his aim.

Then the Colonel seemed to realize his mistake, and he stopped in his tracks. He raised his gun slowly, clear up beside his ear, and brought it down with careful deliberation. Wister, standing dead still, saw the gun coming downward. Then he fired unhurriedly, but with a smooth adjustment of his aim. He heard the bullet hit Colonel Buckner in the chest, saw it knock the man flat on his back. He lowered his own smoking weapon and started walking weakly toward the Colonel.

Buckner rolled over on his side, over onto his belly. He put his two hands under him and raised his great weight up so that he was on his knees. And then he got to his feet, facing away from Wister. He turned around on unsteady legs until he saw Wister again. And then he lifted his gun again.

This time Wister shot him in the head before he could get the gun up. And this time Colonel Buckner did not move when he fell on his back.

Buckner's crew had evaporated into the woods, and after Wister's last shot a sudden silence dropped over the clearing, leaving Wister's ears ringing. He saw Slim Drew and the other man coming toward him.

Terry was coming toward him, too, his white teeth shining behind a very contented grin. And he saw old Bob Terrill emerge from the door of the house with a rifle

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under his arm and a six-gun in his belt. Wister felt very weak, and sat down on a stump while they came up to him.

They were gathered around him now, and Wister looked up at old Terrill and asked, "How come you folks got cornered here?"

OLD TERRILL squatted on one heel. "Well," he said in his slow drawl, "Martha and me got to worrying about how things was going, what with you kind of having to stand alone against that Buckner crew. So this morning she talked me into comin' over with a couple of my boys to see if we could help. We picked up Slim Drew and Chock Lewter along the way, and got here about the middle of the afternoon. We reckoned you'd be along after a while, so we waited. Then a little while ago Buckner rode up at the head of his army and stopped in front of the door and shouted for you to come out. Was raving about you killing Rube, or something. We told him you wasn't here, but he was gonna come in and search. Told us to get out, that he was going to lay the place to waste. Well, since we came to give you a hand, there wasn't nothing to do except to hold him off. He didn't take it too well, I reckon."

That was old Terrill, brief and to the point.

He had not mentioned Harmon, and Wister took it that probably Harmon, seeing Martha's horse in the corral, had kept out of sight. In that case, Martha would not have had the chance to learn of Harmon's duplicity.

Old Terrill rubbed his chin. "Martha's inside. Wouldn't let her come out till after we'd scoured the woods to see that them skunks has kept going. Better go see how's she making out while we take a look around. We'll take care of the dead ones."

Wister got off his stump and went slowly toward the house. Harmon was gone, and Wister knew that he would not be back; but that did not affect Wister, because Martha would never know the things Harmon had done. Wister couldn't tell her.

He walked into the door, and Martha was standing beside the window. She had been looking out at them. He took off his hat and dropped it onto a table. She turned and looked at him, and there were tears in her eyes as she looked at the big red splotch on the side of his shirt, where the wound in his side had started bleeding afresh.

"Is your wound bad?" she asked.

It was a question, but it was not the thing that was on the minds of either. He merely shook his head. He could not tell her about Harmon, and it was painful to be near her with the knowledge of her love for Harmon standing between them. He wished she had not come here, for it merely made it hurt him more.

He had to say something, and so he said, "Bob told me it was you who suggested the idea of coming over to offer your help. I just wanted to thank you for it."

The conversation was going badly, stiffly, and it was Martha who broke through the barrier of their embarrassment.

"I thought you'd like to know," she said, looking out the window again. "I broke my engagement with Vince last night. I'd known for a long time that it was a mistake. I think I must have thrown myself at Vince just to get back at Dad for getting his back up about you. But now that Dad has changed his mind about you, I see that I must have done a pretty good job of fooling myself about Vince. Everything has been so wrong ever since you left. I wish it could have been changed."

"I went away hoping the same thing," Wister said. "But a man can't change, Martha. I went away loving you, and hoping I could get cured of it, but it only made it worse. I couldn't ride far enough to get away from the image of you. That's the way it will always be, however you feel about me. I have never looked at another woman, and I do not want another woman."

She almost ran toward him, and she was in his arms, sobbing. "I know," she said. "That's the way I felt about you at the times I would let myself see the truth. Oh, Jim, it's not too late, is it?"

"It is never too late," Jim answered, and kissed her, and the hungry pressure of his lips hurt her and ignited the hunger of her own love to a white flame.

Jim Wister held her in his arms, and he caressed the hair of her head, and he thought for only one fleeting moment of Harmon running somewhere on the loose, at large

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to do his damage in other and fresher pastures. This was a subject, he warned himself, that he must never mention. She had not learned the complete blackness of the man, and he must guard her against that knowledge for the rest of their days.

It was half an hour later when Terry came to the door of the house with a couple of shovels in his hands. He called out, "Want to see you a minute, Jim."

Jim Wister stepped out the door, and Terry led him fifty feet from the house, standing with the long-handled shovel over his shoulder like a rifle.

"We're going to bury the dead ones before the lady comes outdoors," he said. "Keep her occupied—if you can think of anything to say to her."

The tall end of his statement was delivered with a queer knowing grin. Jim doubled his fist and made a playful pass at him, then turned back toward the house.

Terry said, "O, yeah, one other thing. Don't worry about Harmon."

Wister looked at him puzzled, and Terry explained.

"We found his body out there on a deer trail. He'd been shot, and—" Terry rubbed his chin thoughtfully, "somebody had cut both his ears off square against his head. Wonder who'd do a trick like that?"

They looked at each other with long blank stares for a full moment.

Then Jim Wister said, "I wouldn't have the slightest idea in the world. Would you?"

"Since there are not any warpath Indians around," Terry answered. "I wouldn't be able to even make a guess."

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"After graduating, worked for servicing shop. Now Chief Engineer of three Police Radio Stations."—S. W. DINWIDDIE, Jacksonville, Illinois.

"While learning, made $5 to $10 a week in spare time. Now have a profitable spare time shop."—L. ARNOLD, Pontiac, Mich.

"I accepted a position as Radio and Television Technician . . . was promoted to manager of Television Service and Installation."—L. HAUGER, San Bruno, California.

"Have my own shop. Am authorized serviceman for five manufacturers and do servicing for 7 dealers."—P. MILLER, Maumee, O.

"Four years ago, a bookkeeper on a hand-to-mouth salary, am now a Radio Engineer ABC network."—N. H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey

"When I enrolled, had no idea it would be so easy to learn. Have equipped my shop out of spare time earnings. I am clearing about $40 to $60 a month."—J. D. KNIGHT, Denison, Tex.

I Will Train You at Home with MANY KITS OF PARTS I SEND

Do you want good pay, a job with a bright future and security? Would you like a profitable shop of your own? The fast growing, prosperous RADIO-TELEVISION industry is making these opportunities for you. Radio alone is bigger than ever. 90 million home and auto Radios, 3100 Broadcasting Stations, expanding use of Aviation and Police Radio, Micro-Wave Relay, Two-Way Radio for buses, taxis, etc., are making opportunities for Servicing and Communications Technicians and FCC-Licensed Operators.

Television is TODAY'S Good Job Maker

In 1946 only 6,000 TV sets sold. In 1950 over 5,000,000. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets will be in use, according to estimates. Over 100 TV Stations are operating in 35 states. Authorities predict there will be 1,000 TV Stations. This means new jobs, more jobs, good pay for qualified men.

Many Soon Make $10 A Week Extra in Spare Time

Keep your job while training at home. Hundreds I've trained are successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE experimenting with circuits common to Radio and Television. Many students make $5, $10 a week extra fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. Special Booklets start teaching you the day you enroll.

Send Now for 2 Books FREE—Mail Coupon

Send for my FREE DOUBLE OFFER. Get actual Servicing lesson. Also get my 64-page book, "How to Be a Success in Radio-Television." Read what my graduates are doing, earning. Send coupon in envelope or paste on postal. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. **2CR** National Radio Institute, Washington 9. D. C. **OUR 38TH YEAR.**

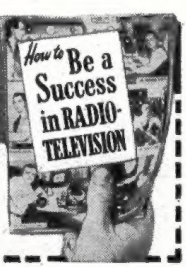
NOW! Advanced Television Practice

New, special TV kits furnished to build high-definition SCOPE . . . RF OSCILLATOR with flyback power supply . . . complete TV set . . . many other units. You see pulse, trapezoidal, saw-tooth wave forms. Get valuable PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE locating and correcting TV troubles. Mail coupon for facts, pictures and prices!

A TESTED WAY TO BETTER PAY...MAIL COUPON NOW

Good for Both-FREE

The ABC's of SERVICING



MR. J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 2CR
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.

Mail me FREE Lesson and 64-page book. (No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

NAME..... AGE.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... ZONE..... STATE.....

REINFORCED NYLON SOX

SPECIALLY TWISTED WITH ADDED YARNS FOR EXTRA WEAR AND COMFORT

GUARANTEED TO WEAR FOR 12 MONTHS WITHOUT HOLES OR YOU GET NEW SOX ABSOLUTELY FREE

LESS THAN 60¢ A PAIR

5 PAIRS $2.98

SEND NO MONEY—JUST MAIL COUPON!

Think of it! Handsome reinforced NYLON socks for less than 60¢ a pair! You couldn't ask for better-looking or better-wearing hose if you paid twice as much. But that's not all! These socks are GUARANTEED. Even if you stand on your feet for hours every day, even if your toes grind through ordinary socks as though they were tissue paper; if you wear a hole in any pair of these super NYLON SOX within one year, YOU GET NEW ONES ABSOLUTELY FREE —and they cost less than 60¢ a pair!

HOW IS THIS AMAZING OFFER POSSIBLE?

First, you save real money by buying DIRECT from the Joy Hosiery Mills. Our guarantee is possible because these good-looking socks are made of reinforced NYLON. Yes, DuPont special twist, super-strength Nylon reinforced with added yarns, gives them their wear-defying durability. They are finely knit, with elastic tops, soles of soft, absorbent Durene lisle. What's more, the heels and toes are TRIPLE-BLOCKED for extra protection at points of hardest wear.

You'll be delighted with the smart appearance of these socks—their lustrous, silky smooth finish, perfect for dress or business. Your choice of anklet or regular length, of rich assorted colors, or all black, or all white. Fast-dye colors never run or fade.

SEE THEM! FEEL THEM! EXAMINE THEM!—WITHOUT OBLIGATION!

Prove to yourself that this is the biggest value in men's hose you have ever seen. Let us send you a box of five pairs for 5 DAYS' EXAMINATION. No obligation to keep them. Compare these socks with others costing $1.00 or more a pair. Read the Guarantee Certificate. You must be convinced this is the hosiery buy of your life or return the socks and you will be out nothing. And the *wear* is guaranteed for an entire year!

Mail the coupon or write today, specifying size, whether anklet or regular length, color preference (see list below). Don't delay. You take no risk. Read money-back offer in coupon.

SIZES

10 to 13 (in half sizes for perfect fit)

COLORS

Assorted { 2 prs. Navy, 2 prs. Brown, 1 pr. Maroon

All Black — All White

JOY HOSIERY MILLS, Dept. S-141, Clifton, New Jersey

Regular Length

Elastic Ankle Length

GUARANTEE

Every purchase is covered by the iron-clad Guarantee of the Joy Hosiery Mills. A printed Guarantee Certificate comes with your socks, written in plain language, without any *ands, ifs* or *buts*. It means exactly what it says: You are unconditionally GUARANTEED ONE FULL YEAR OF SATISFACTORY WEAR from each and every pair of socks or you get NEW SOCKS FREE to replace those that wear out.

The Guarantee Certificate is dated. It goes into effect the day you receive your socks and it continues in force for a full year. It protects you against any possibility of misunderstanding, question or quibble. It is your absolute assurance of service and value.

JOY HOSIERY MILLS, Dept. S-141, Clifton, New Jersey

Please send me 5 pairs Guaranteed socks for examination. I will pay the postman only $2.98 plus postal charges on delivery, with the understanding that you will refund my money in full if I return the socks in 5 days. If I keep them, you guarantee to replace FREE any pairs in which I wear holes within ONE YEAR.

☐ Check here if you prefer to enclose $2.98 and we will pay postal charge. Same return privilege, same Free Replacement Guarantee.

Size..... Color: ☐ Assorted. ☐ Black. ☐ White. ☐ Regular ☐ Anklet

Name .....

Address .....

City..... Zone.... State.....